

MIKE SHAYNE



JUNE 1984

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MURDER

by Brett Halliday

A New Pulpster

Novelet

DEATH CRUISE

by Mike Taylor

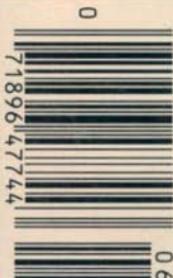
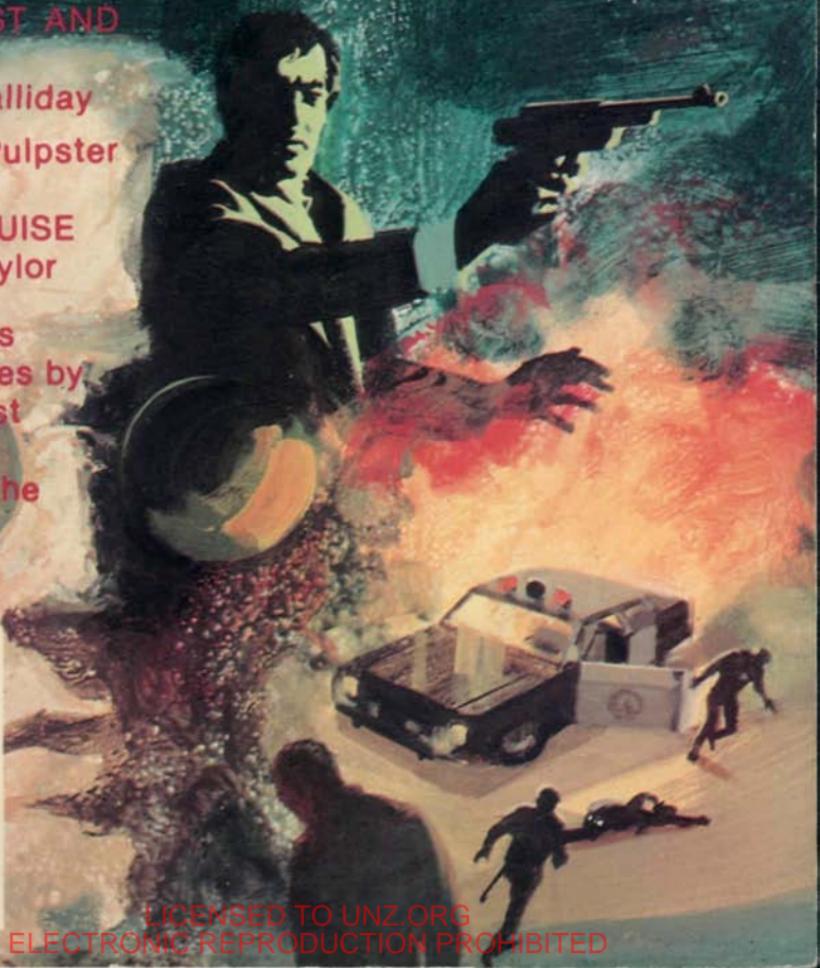
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DEVIL DUST AND DEATH

by Brett Halliday

The high school was a jungle of drugs and depravity, and Mike Shayne was in it up to his earlobes. Not only was his own life at stake, but so were the lives of the innocent 4

NOVELETS

DEATH CRUISE

Mike Taylor 41

WHEN IT ALL FALLS INTO PLACE

Jerry Jacobson 62

SHORT STORIES

EVERY DOG HAS HIS DAY

Mel Washburn 79

ALL THAT GLITTERS

Terry Black 90

END OF THE LINE

Lee Dugon 102

THE PERFECTIONISTS

William F. Smith 108

YOU MEET ALL KINDS

Mark Kamensky 113

THE DREAMER

Arthur Moore 118

ALWAYS PREPARED

Susan Zulch 122

FEATURES

MIKE'S MAIL 101, 117

STIFF COMPETITION (Book Reviews)

John Ball 126

At six-feet, six-inches, the hulking figure was obviously not a high school kid. In his hands were a pair of Oriental nunchakas that whirred in front of him like a macabre propeller. Smiling, he moved toward the waiting detective!

Devil Dust And Murder

by BRETT HALLIDAY

PIERCE PRESSED HIS SWEaty FACE AGAINST THE PLATE-glass window. Through the steamed-up surface he could see nothing but the sallow moon over Miami silently and mockingly staring back at him. Pierce was dead certain he had noticed a face looking momentarily inward.

Maybe some of the students had been hanging out in the parking lot, he decided. Now was the hour when half of them were out making buys and the other half love. Most of them got so high at night they probably didn't know the difference. Future generations were being bred in the front seat of Chevys all across the country at that moment. Nothing much had changed since he had been a student.

He returned to the table in the middle of the laboratory. A solitary bunsen burner still glowed. Several beakers sat quietly. He looked at

the crystalline formations in the cannisters he had uncapped. No, now wasn't the time to be working late.

Pierce began to clean up, making certain that everything went back exactly to its place. The cannisters he locked in the file cabinet. In the short time he had been sharing the lab equipment and files with Phil Jacobs, he had found the new chem teacher to be very possessive. In fact, Jacobs with his long 1960-ish hair and his Ichabod Crane figure reminded Pierce of a woman the way he was so meticulous about the lab, how his deep-set eyes became suspicious of everything. There—Jacobs wouldn't even be able to tell the cabinet had been opened.

Pierce heard a noise this time. It came from up the hall. The science wing, which had been added to Steward High in the aftermath of Sputnik, jutted out from the main building and thus was exposed on three sides. Pierce remembered sending Principal Brosnahan at least three memos about break-ins, but as usual with administrators nothing had happened.

His deck shoes making no sound, Pierce crept to the lab door and peered out through the reinforced glass. Nothing. A few lights had been left on, but no movement was visible.

Burnout, that's what it was, Pierce decided. Teacher burnout—the great enemy of the eighties. The kids wore you down during the day. The administration offered no support. No money was ever available for supplies or field trips. Salaries stayed the same. He had lost more to inflation in the last decade than most men had gained. Burnout, it made you moonlight. It made you have to work after hours to get everything done. It made you see and hear things that just weren't there.

Pierce ran his hands through his thinning blond hair. He was losing that too. A decade ago he had borne at least a passing resemblance to Robert Redford. Now he looked more like a bit player. Where had all the promise gone?

He sat down on a twice-repaired barstool and stared into the short flame on the burner. Oh, it burned blue at the center, but a lot of yellow tinged the edges, and it flickered. No strength. Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew the papers and the bag. Then, laying out a wafer-thin piece, he lined it with some cheap grass he had confiscated from one of his sixth-period kids earlier that day. He lit up and sucked deeply. Definitely not the Acapulco Gold he used to treasure. One slam from yesterday's grass, and he was mellow for hours. Put on a little Byrds or Rolling Stones, float up into the rafters and not come down till all the hassles were gone.

HE HAD JUST TAKEN A MILD HIT WHEN HE HEARD THE shuffle, a sound like shoes being dragged over waxed floors. Probably some kids had broken in again. Maybe like he, they had gotten high. Funny, while joints always made him passive, a lot of people had to move, to do something. Hell, why couldn't these burglars be content with their videogames. Swallow a few power pills, destroy a few galaxies, and nobody cared, but to sneak onto his turf, his building, his lab.

Pierce was scared. He was swimming in the pit of his own stomach, and the acid burned—like fire. Sure he had lost his nerve. He didn't try to hide that, but what could you expect?

A few years ago all respect for authority had vanished. That big kid, Juan, the one in that gang always hanging about the school, the one who was now doing time at Starke, had gotten mad at him during a titration experiment. Juan had held him down and tried to burn him with a bunsen. Just as the Hispanic creep had singed a few nose hairs, which was the reason he now wore a mustache, Charlie Spangler had come in and stopped him. At the trial Juan swore he'd be back to finish the job.

Funny, Spangler had gotten out right there, and the battered teacher had stayed. Spangler was the smart one. Last year Pierce had received a card from Delaware. Spangler, working now for Monsanto and getting more than twice as much for it, had written, "and the best part is there's not a damned case of acne in the whole plant."

Pierce touched the tip of his nose. He could feel the smooth skin, the heat still. The mustache was necessary because plastic surgery had been more than he could afford, and Steward's insurance didn't cover such things.

Two sounds reverberated down the corridor toward him. More than one kid breaking in. Pierce looked around. They had probably seen him through the windows and knew he was alone. Damn, why hadn't he just gone straight back to his apartment after the workout in the gym. She might have been waiting, and her arms wouldn't have been the only things open.

If he cut through the adjoining physics lab and out the supply room door beside it, he might be able to get to his car. Pierce shut off the light. The moon gave him all he needed. He headed toward the side exit.

The chem lab door jiggled.

Pierce hurried through the physics lab. Suddenly he heard a loud snap and a pop like a bubble bursting. Ping pong balls were

everywhere. Snap, snap. Pop. A bowl of Rice Krispies gone mad. Bob Myers had set up his chain reaction demonstration for first period. The floor was covered with mouse traps. On each one sat a ping pong ball. When he had stepped on the first trap, it had launched a ball, which had hit another trap, and so on. He saw he was frozen, the chain reaction having distracted him. Whoever was at the chem lab door couldn't help but hear the noise.

Pierce ran, hoping that the traps snapping at his feet like baby alligators were made for mice and not rats.

Out through the supply room and into the hall.

It was empty.

He was sprinting now.

Behind him he heard echoes.

No, not echoes. Other feet.

They were moving together.

He rounded the main corridor and turned right. Why? To the left was the parking lot.

The wire door that closed off the corridor stopped his running, knocking him back to the floor.

He couldn't go forward and he couldn't go backward.

His mind wouldn't work. That damned joint had been just powerful enough to confuse him. Where was he? Headed down Corridor C? He forced himself to think as he stood up.

The gym. It was off to the right. He tried the door.

Locked.

Pierce looked around. One of the school's clubs had been selling something and had left a table in the hallway.

Pierce grabbed one end and shoved it against the double doors into the gym. Again. It gave, but didn't break. Again. The doors opened inward with a loud crack.

The gymnasium without anybody in it seemed as large as the inside of the Astrodome. Moonlight filtered through the upper windows, striking the upraised baskets, sending out mis-shaped shadows in all directions. Pierce could hear his heart echo in the expanse.

Where could he hide? He hadn't thought that far ahead, and in his eagerness to get through the door he had made enough noise for an old lady to track him.

What could he do now?

When the three figures came through the open doors, something was squatting at center court. A tiny orange winked at them.

They strode closer. One carried a chain. In the scant light a pair of eyes stared straight at them, wide open but unseeing.

"You know why I'm here," said the figure with the chain.

"Hi, fellas," said Pierce as he exhaled, "want a drag?"

Unfortunately they didn't.

II

WHEN MIKE SHAYNE WALKED INTO HIS FLAGLER STREET office Friday morning, he found his world turned topsy-turvy. His beautiful brunette secretary Lucy Hamilton was staring at him—upside down.

"Do you always walk around with your jaw open?" she said.

The door to his private office was ajar, the big redhead noticed, and thanks to a pair of metal anklets hooked over the door, she hung there.

"Been sleeping with the bats, Angel?" he said.

"Bats?" she began to look around furtively. "Where?"

"Only creature I know of that sleeps upside down."

"Listen, Mr. Know-it-all, I am not sleeping. I am exercising."

"Funny, you look like you were resting to me." The rangy detective fired up his first Camel of the morning.

"For your information, these are what Solarian calls his Null Grav Boots."

"Who's Solarian?"

"My instructor at that new health club I just joined."

Shayne pulled up a chair and straddled it across from her. "That the same health club that gave you the free trial membership?"

"Yes."

"And the same one that sold you their health-food supplements at a discount?"

"Yes."

"And the aerobics lessons. They were a few dollars extra."

Lucy hesitated. "Yes."

"The sweat suit and leotards with their logo. I forgot. How much did you pay for them?"

"Well . . . about a hundred and . . ."

"This Solarian didn't exactly throw in those ankle chains, did he?"

"No, but . . . Michael, you don't understand. It's gravity. It's been pulling down on you so long that it's compressed your brain."

The redhead exhaled slowly. "I'm not the one who got the whole package—the free membership, the cut-rate food, the discount clothes, the boots. It's a good thing I pay you so well."

Her top lip pushed down as she pouted. "It's just like Solarian says: you can't put a price tag on health."

"I can understand why he says that. A few more customers like you,

and he'll be ready to retire."

Suddenly his secretary's eyes widened. "Michael, behind you."

With speed that belied his large size, the redhead spun around.

Standing in the doorway, propped against the frame was a tall, blond man. His face looked to Shayne like it had stood in for a speed bag at a local gym.

The big detective helped the man into his office and sat him down on the red couch that was still in need of upholstering. Lucy, having swung loose from her perch, came out of the bathroom with a wet towel. Gently she began to apply it to the bruised and cut face.

"You Shayne?" whispered the battered figure.

"Yeah."

"I need your help."

"You need a doctor, pal."

"All in good time."

"When did this happen?" said Shayne.

"Last night, out at Miami Steward," he winced. "I'm a teacher there."

"Did you report this to the police?"

"Hey, I barely had enough energy to get myself here."

"Is there some reason," asked the redhead suspiciously, "that you didn't want to go to the police?"

"Efficacy. They haven't got it—you do."

"Michael," said Lucy, "should I . . ."

"Yeah, Angel. Get Will on the phone." He turned to the now prostrate figure. "He's the Chief down at Metro."

"Fine," said the blond, "but while we're waiting I want to hire you."

"Now's not the time. Besides, the police will handle it free."

"I can afford you if you can afford the time."

"Why a private investigator?"

"Because I'm a chemist. I deal with empirical data. The police can search the Steward gym till their faces are as blue as their uniforms, and they still aren't going to find anything. But my eyes, they read the paper. You're the best. You're the guy who finds people who can't be found and who solves cases that can't be solved."

"You're making my secretary blush," said Shayne.

"I want results, and I want them fast. I don't want to be the file at the bottom of the pile on some tired lieutenant's desk. I want to know who did this to me, and I want to know immediately."

"Believe me," said the big detective, "Metro will take your case seriously. Say, it looks like someone wanted to send you a message. Did

whoever did this . . .”

“There were three of them.”

“What were you doing at the high school late last night?”

“Trying to catch up on my workload. You been reading that series on local education that the *Miami Daily News* has been running?”

“Yeah. I know Rourke, the writer.”

“It’s a good series. Accurate as hell. If he wants another part, you can send him around to me.”

“Will’s got a black-and-white on the way,” Lucy announced.

“You gonna take the case or did I stagger all the way into this rathole for nothing?” asked the man on the couch.

“What’s your name?” said Shayne.

“Pierce, Mark Pierce.”

“Close your eyes,” said the redhead.

Pierce did, his face quivering in pain.

“Picture the high school gym,” said Shayne. “It’s dark. Almost a full moon last night. You should have been able to see something. I’ve got a friend out at Steward, the football coach, and I’ve been to a few basketball games there with him. The light should have been fairly bright through those upper windows.”

“Yeah, but there was one problem. I was high when it happened.”

“Booze?”

“Grass. Really Class D stuff, but what happened to me was no hallucination.”

Shayne looked down at the teacher. The first of the chemical generation. Probably started smoking the stuff in college, he thought.
“What do you see?”

“Three guys. Jeans and jackets.”

“Their faces?” said the redhead.

“No, only shadows there.”

“You’re not giving me much to go on.”

“You taking this case?”

“Yeah,” said Shayne. When he had first seen the beaten man’s face, he knew he had probably made up his mind.

“Thanks. One thing—you can’t let anybody know who you are. The principal’s a real pain in the ass. He’d have my job if he knew I had someone snooping around *his* school.”

“I can handle that.”

“Come to think of it. I did see something last night.”

“What?”

“The guy with the chain had the letter S on his chest. It was like getting beat up by Superman.”

III

FOLLOWING THE DIRECTIONS A JANITOR HAD GIVEN HIM, Shayne walked down the dimly-lit corridor looking for a hallway marked SCIENCE. Classes were in session, and the route was deserted. The spray paint on the walls and the uprooted linoleum reminded him more of a condemned tenement than a high school. Tim's series had hit the nail on the head. Just as he spotted the sign he had been looking for, he heard a familiar voice.

"Hey, Red, you want to try out for the team?"

Coming down the hallway to his right was a heavy-set black man with a clean-shaven head. To see his smile Shayne had to look up.

"Hello, Pee-wee," said the private investigator. "I thought it was illegal for high school coaches to recruit."

"Tell that to the Catholic schools," said the massive figure. "It's good to see you again. What are you doing here? Finishing your education?"

"A client, but that's between you and me."

"Let me guess. You're heading down the science wing. It's early in the morning, so whatever brings you here probably happened late last night. Mark Pierce didn't show up: The janitors were griping about having to scrub the blood off the gym floor." He pointed a finger at his temple. "Mark Pierce got beat up in the gym, and he's hired you to find out who did it?"

"When you retired from the Dolphins, Pee-wee, you should have become a private eye. That's some deducting."

"Actually everybody was talking about it in the teachers' lounge this morning." Then the black man grew serious. "You know, since I left pro ball, my life's been kind of dull. You ever think of taking on a partner?"

"I've got two already."

"Really? Who?"

"A Mr. Smith and a Mr. Wesson."

Suddenly his face broke into a grin, and he slapped Shayne's palm. "You're jiving me now, but I'm serious. Coaching Steward's football team is good work, but trying to get forty kids to do what I tell them for three months isn't a whole lot of fun. You ever need some help, you let me know."

"I talked to a couple of teachers before the first period started. They all said that a guy named Jacobs was about the only person Pierce ever talked to around here, the only man who might know something about him."

"Pierce is a loner all right. If anybody knows something, Phil Jacobs is the one. Hey, don't forget what I said."

"I'll keep it in mind."

"You know I still owe you, owe you big." He glanced at his watch. "I'd love to stay and talk, but the bus leaves in a minute for a road game. Later."

"It's good to see you." They shook hands, and Shayne watched the man depart. Edmund "Peewee" Shrike had been a fixture at right guard with the dolphins for a dozen years before old age and a bum knee had done to him what NFL defenses hadn't. They had met six years ago when the Dolphin's had asked Shayne to investigate some woman who claimed Shrike had fathered her child. The trail had led to a bunch of bookies who were using her to get their hooks into a twenty-seven year old, innocent kid from St. Marx, Florida. Since then they had run into each other two or three times a year, and every time they did the redhead had to fend off a would-be Watson.

SHAYNE CONTINUED DOWN THE HALL TILL HE CAME TO A door marked CHEMISTRY LABORATORY. The door was open. Shayne walked in. In the background a group of students milled around test tubes. Sitting on a worn barstool directly in front of him and fingering through some crumbled papers was a lanky man in his mid-twenties.

"What do you want?" said the figure, turning to Shayne.

"Oh, just familiarizing myself with the building," said the big detective, getting an idea. "Peewee, Coach Shrike, has just brought me aboard as his defensive coach."

"Phil Jacobs," said the man as he offered his hand. "With the team's record Shrike needs all the help he can get."

"I know what you mean. Steward's got a reputation as a tough place."

"Believe me," said Jacobs, "it's deserved."

"Hey, didn't I hear something in the teachers' lounge about some guy—a chemistry teacher, wasn't it—that didn't show up for school today. Everybody thinks he got beat up or something."

"Wouldn't surprise me in the least," said Jacobs, pushing away the papers and motioning the redhead into his office. "This place is a real zoo. Mugging for lunch money, fighting in the halls, smoking dope in the johns—and that's before first period starts. I'm going to finish this year, then get out, go back to where I came from."

Shayne, noticing a doctorate from UCLA behind the cluttered desk, said, "Who would beat up on a teacher?"

"With your build, friend, I don't think you have anything to worry about. Now the rest of us . . ."

"You mean students actually attack teachers?"

"This is the real world, Red, not that crap they give you in education courses."

"I still can't believe a student would do something like that."

"Well, Mark's got a roving eye, if you know what I mean, but a better guess would be an irate parent mad over Little Johnny's failing chemistry. Mark's got a bad reputation for flunking kids. Say, you have a cigarette on you?"

Shayne flipped out a Camel and handed it to Jacobs. The chemistry teacher lit up and inhaled deeply.

"Put that out, Jacobs," came a deep voice from outside the office door. "Students have enough excuses to smoke without seeing the teachers do it."

"This is our principal, Mr. Brosnahan," Jacobs informed the redhead.

"Who are you?" said the figure in a baggy seersucker suit and black bow tie.

"New assistant football coach," said Jacobs.

"Coach Shrike hired me yesterday," said Shayne. "Didn't he tell you?"

"Our dear Coach Shrike doesn't tell me anything," said Brosnahan. "But, then, nobody ever does. Here we are under seige and underpaid. High school test scores have never been worse. And have you looked at the halls lately. Their last coat of paint came from vandals and their spray cans. So what does our school board in its all-knowing wisdom do for us? Hire a new English teacher? A janitor? Extra clerical help? No. They send us another football coach." The balding principal threw up his hands. "What else can go wrong today?"

A loud screech pierced their ears. Suddenly the doors slamming open echoed through the corridor. A kid screamed.

"What's that?" said Shayne.

"One of those little bastards didn't feel like taking his math test, so he threw the frigging fire alarm," said the principal. "Welcome to Steward High."

IV

SHORTLY AFTER SUNDOWN SHAYNE SLOWLY SWUNG THE powerful Buick into the parking lot at the rear of Steward High. Expecting to find perhaps one or two parkers, he was shocked at what he confronted.

Maybe the full moon had driven him crazy, he thought, but it looked like a block party in full swing. Over a dozen cars perched on the blacktop. Huge portable radios blared out cacophonous musical testimonies to the agony and ecstasy of love. Most of the kids had wrapped themselves in the sexual freedom of the front seat. Like vendors at ballgames, several teenagers hawked their illegal wares. Shayne took a deep breath, but the tropical night air had suddenly turned nauseous.

The redhead parked the Buick off to the side and got out. Immediately a boy and girl, both appearing too young to have their driver's licenses, strolled up.

"Hey, man," said the boy. "You're in luck. Whatever it is you're selling, we're buying."

The t-shirted girl with him said, "You got any of that new dust everybody's using?"

Their feet were on the ground, but the redhead knew their heads were in the clouds. "You two hang out here all the time?"

"Something else there is to do?" said the girl.

"Maybe I should be at home," said the boy, "with my family. I really enjoy watching Daddy Guzzle beer in front of the boob tube. Then there's that special moment every night when Mommy Dearest gets home from one of her club meetings and they get into their usual argument that ends with Daddy knocking her to the rug or throwing up on it."

"You're lucky, Robbie," said the girl. "I haven't seen my mother since she amscraied with some K-mart manager a couple of years ago. If I stay home, I just get in the way of the old man and his girl of the week."

The redhead steeled himself against the boy's fetid, onion-reeking breath and said, "You both here last night?"

"Every night," said Robbie. His nose starting to bleed. "Now, what you got to offer?"

The redhead looked at Jack and Jill, wanting to give them some advice, but what could he say and what good would it do? A voice in the back of his head whispered, *You can clean up a few corners, but not all of them.* "A guy got beat up in the gym last night," he simply said. "You see anybody go in?"

The teenagers looked at each other.

"I thought you were selling something, man. Get out of my face," said the boy. "Come on, Amy. We've got enough for one more hit of Devil Dust. Let's go buy some good times."

So that's what they were calling the latest joyride, thought Shayne.

Different names, same results—screwed-up lives.

The same questions got the detective more of the same answers—rolled up windows, spaced-out eyes, and slurred speech. If the kids had seen anything, they weren't going to tell or couldn't remember. As Shayne bent over and picked up a foot-long piece of surgical tubing from the still-warm pavement, he saw a shower of sparks.

Low-riders, the redhead knew. Chevys whose suspension systems had been altered so that the bodies could be hydraulically raised and lowered. Scraping the blacktop, two cars advanced like mechanical fire-breathing dragons. Oblivious to the redhead in the corner of the lot, they pulled to a stop. The doors flew open, and as in the clown-car routines in a circus, teenager after teenager piled out.

They were all wearing red satin jackets with some undiscernible emblem on them. Shayne watched as the jacketed figures moved individually and in pairs from car to car. Each time they said something to the occupants, then reached in through the windows. Had the kids connected?

Abruptly something went wrong. A dark-haired boy was jerked out of his convertible by a couple of the red jackets. Yelling something at him, they banged him against the car and rammed a knee into his groin. Doubled over, the kid handed something to one of the attackers.

"Hey, Miguel," came a high-pitched voice across the lot, "we got ourselves an interested spectator."

All the red jackets turned to Shayne. The redhead counted eleven.

THE GROUP MARCHED IN HIS DIRECTION, THEN FORMED A horseshoe around him. One, who Shayne decided to be their leader, stepped forward. "Hey, man, what the hell you doing in Serpientes turf?"

"Pal, if you could read, you could tell this is school property."

"We got us a comedian, Miguel," said a greasy figure to the leader.

"Since this is school property," said Miguel, "let me give the man a history lesson."

All the red jackets burst into laughter.

Striking a mock serious pose, Miguel said, "Down through history everybody has needed authority to protect them from raiders, vandals, savages. Here, we are the authority. Here, we take care of our friends. And we ask so little in payment."

"I just saw some of that protection," said Shayne.

"Hey, bro," laughed Miguel, "we have our overhead too. It takes mucho dinero to maintain our patrol cars. If somebody decides not to

pay up, well, we have to demonstrate the logic of our services."

Thinking that logic was not Miguel's strong suit, Shayne said, "You guys patrolling this place last night?"

"What if we were?" said Miguel.

"Did you go into the school or see any of your friends hanging around there?"

"I haven't been in that freaking school since I was fifteen. Do you want me to ruin my reputation?" Miguel looked back at his band, who laughed loudly again. "But who in the hell are you to ask Las Serpientes questions? You from the competition?"

"Let's just say I'm a janitor," said the redhead. "The school board hired me to clean up all the garbage in the parking lot."

"He is a comedian," said Miguel. "Raphael, front and center. Did you hear this man insult the honor of Las Serpientes?" The gang leader turned to Shayne. "Raphael is our Warlord. He especially likes to discipline big-mouth janitors."

Shayne looked across the night at the hulking figure of Raphael. 6' 6" and 230 pounds, he was obviously not a high school kid.

"Show him your brand new chakas, Raphael," said a voice from the rear.

As if he were a magician, a pair of Oriental nunchakas appeared in the Hispanic's hands. Shayne squared his feet. Raphael executed a flawless kata with his weapon to demonstrate his proficiency.

The Warlord advanced, his deadly club whirring in front of him like a macabre propeller. Shayne ripped off his belt. The words of Greg Chen, his martial arts sensei, came to him: to the man with imagination anything can be a weapon.

Miguel said, "Raphael, turn that sucker into a woodpecker—make him eat wood!"

FIRST ONE OF THE TWO FOOT-LONG BILLYCLUBS JOINED by a chain swirled by Shayne's ear, then the other.

The redhead ducked and retreated.

Raphael picked up his speed and lunged forward.

Shayne stepped aside at the last possible nano-second. As the Hispanic passed him, the detective drove his left elbow into the side of the ribcage.

The cracked bone only irritated Raphael.

The club ends flashed before Shayne's face, closer and closer. The redhead grasped the belt tightly at either end and suddenly thrust it upward. One end of the nunchakas wrapped around it.

Shayne yanked hard. The nunchakas tore from Raphael's grasp.

Shayne hurled the weapon like bolas at Miguel.

Weaponless, the gang's Warlord assumed a martial arts stance.

Shayne wanted it over fast. Raphael stood six feet away, his right foot in front of his left.

The rawboned redhead attacked. He covered the distance with a single step. A low, sweeping sidekick caught an unprepared Raphael in the front kneecap.

Shayne heard bone crush, and his antagonist dropped to the blacktop. Quickly the detective faced Las Serpientes. For the first time he noticed the striking serpents on their jackets. They seemed to form an S.

"We're going to slice you up, chum," said Miguel, "and feed you to the sharks."

"Not unless you're Superman, pal," said Shayne.

"What are you talking about, bro?"

The redhead pulled out the Smith & Wesson from the small of his back and pointed it at Miguel's groin. "Not unless you're faster than a speeding bullet, pal."

The gang leader stared into the revolver's barrel, then into Shayne's steel-gray eyes. They seemed to look the same, for he said, "Next time, big mouth. We'll see you, but you won't see us till it's too late."

They picked up their fallen comrade, piled in their vehicles, and departed. Showers of sparks like comets' tails bid the detective farewell.

Shayne stood there, glad he hadn't had to shoot a punk or two. The blacktop was dirty enough.

"Thanks, mister." It was Robbie looking suddenly underage. The girl clung to his side as tightly as wet clothing. "Maybe we can do you a favor."

"Last night," said the girl, who Shayne remembered was named Amy, "there was a brown van down by the science wing."

"A van," said Shayne. "Any other distinguishing features?"

"Yeah, one," said the boy. "I told Amy it was a month early for Halloween."

"I don't understand," admitted the redhead.

"The van," said the girl, "all I remember about it was the painting on the side—a giant pumpkin."

V

EARLY SATURDAY MORNING SHAYNE GOT LUCKY AND found a parking place in front of the bakery. As he opened its door on which had been painted a happy-faced pumpkin, he reflected on how

refreshingly easy it had been to follow up the lead he had been given the previous night. Sometimes you tailed a suspect for weeks only to come up empty, and sometimes you just let your fingers do the walking. Greater Miami's Yellow Pages had provided the answer. A pumpkin wasn't the kind of thing a customizer would put on a van, but it made a good business logo. Halfway through the phone book, he had found Jack Lantern's Bakery.

An older woman who was wiping her hands on her apron appeared behind the display case. "You look like a chocolate eclair to me," she said with a smile so warm Shayne figured it could bake bread.

"No thanks. I . . ."

She handed him a fat eclair wrapped in wax paper. "The first one's on me. Jack—my late husband—always said give the customers quality and they'll come back. Taste that chocolate frosting. Jack's secret. Nothing but real butter, not lard like those donut chains all over town use."

Biting into the flakey crust, the big detective realized that this was a habit he could easily get hooked on. "The eclair's really good, but I need something other than calories this morning."

"Coffee." She reached for a styrofoam cup and filled it with the dark, rich liquid.

"Information," said Shayne.

She handed him the cup. "That'll be \$.50."

Shayne fumbled in his pocket for the change. "Do you own a brown van with your pumpkin logo on it?"

"Why, yes," the smiling woman said. "Our delivery truck."

"Can I see it?"

"I'm afraid Larry—that's Larry Gaines—hasn't come in yet this morning."

"You mean Larry had the van last night?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "Jack and I were instrumental in getting the city's Operation Breadloaf program going. You know, every night certain restaurants and bakeries take their edible leftovers to orphanages, old folks homes, and charity groups around town. Jack always said you have to help those in need 'cause some day you may be in their shoes."

Shayne wiped the chocolate from his chin. "So Larry's your delivery man?"

"Delivery boy." she handed Shayne another eclair. "Every night at closing, about 8:00, we load up the remaining bakery goods, and Larry makes his stops. Then he takes the van home and meets me here to open the place the next morning. I let him keep the van overnight as a bonus

for helping me with Operation Breadloaf."

The redhead glanced at the clock. It was almost nine. "Is he usually in by this time?"

"Yes. Larry's a responsible young man. He's come a long way. Jack hired him a couple of years ago after he dropped out of school."

"Miami Steward?"

"Let me see," she said, refilling the coffee cup. "Yes, I believe it was Steward. As I recall, some teacher failed him in a very important class. Kept him from getting a football scholarship. Must have knocked him for a loop 'cause he just gave up. Nothing but a dropout hanging around the shoolyard. Then Jack gave him a second chance. You know, drive the van . . . wait a minute . . . Larry's not in any kind of trouble, is he?"

"No, it's just that I was in an accident the other day. The only witness was somebody in your van. I've been trying to track him down."

"If Larry saw the accident, he'll help you. He's such a good boy." She gestured at a framed photograph behind her. "That's Larry. Jack's got his arm around him, just like a son."

Shayne saw a big, sandy-haired kid next to a white-haired man with a mustache.

"Here's the address," she said, writing on a napkin. "Tell him Mary Lou—that's me—has been a little worried since he didn't come in. Tell him to call me."

"Thanks a lot," said the detective, pocketing the address and heading for the door.

"Oh, one thing."

"Yes."

"The coffee refill's free, but the second eclair—that's 39 cents please."

Shayne handed over the change willing. It was a cheap price to pay to fill both your stomach and your mind.

PARADISE ESTATES WAS A SERIES OF TRACT HOUSES. Built obviously as a retirement community in the 50's, the dreams and stucco walls had long since deteriorated. Now the place seemed a holding tank for immigrants, migrants—people who were too rich to qualify for public housing and too poor to afford respectability.

Shayne stubbed out a Camel and pondered what he had learned. Larry Gaines had lost a college scholarship because he had flunked a course at Steward. Jacobs had said that Pierce was a tough teacher who flunked a lot of students. Had one of them been Larry Gaines? If so,

had Gaines gone back and beat him up? It was a good theory, but one thing struck the redhead as odd: why had the kid waited two years for revenge?

The lawn at 149 Paradise Street hadn't been cut in a long time, and the concrete driveway was spiderwebbed with cracks. The big detective rang the doorbell and heard nothing. He knocked. Still nothing. He walked around to the back. No sign of anybody. He looked in through the rear sliding-glass door. Cheap furniture stared back.

Shayne looked around the small backyard and noticed a garage in the rear. Its door was also locked. He peered through the single, diamond-shaped window on the door. A brown van with an orange pumpkin filled the inside. Shayne sniffed. A familiar odor penetrated his nostrils.

Making a fist, he punched down hard on the garage door handle. The spring gave. He raised the door. The remnants of exhaust fumes were unmistakable.

Spotting the driver's window open, Shayne checked out the cab.

Just what he expected. A sandy-haired figure was slumped over the steering wheel.

Larry Gaines.

The detective's trained eyes scanned the cab. A clipboard hung from the dash with some yellow delivery orders. Shayne noticed a torn white sheet with typing on it. Unable to read the paper, he walked around to the other side. The note was short: I CAN'T TAKE THIS HELL ANY MORE. It was signed in blue ink, Larry.

One more thing caught Shayne's eye. Larry Gaines was wearing a blue letter jacket. Stitched to its front was a bright-red S.

VI

AS HE LEFT 147 PARADISE STREET, SHAYNE THANKED THE Haitian woman again for the use of her telephone. Lt. Roca at Homicide would be there soon, and a black-and-white had already been dispatched. The redhead knew that if he hadn't been a personal friend of the chief, the investigation into Gaines' death would have found its way to the bottom of the case files, the very thing Pierce feared about his beating. It was an unfortunate fact of life that even homicide, despite what he had said to Pierce, was political. Had Larry Gaines' been a state senator or a local businessman, his death would have drawn an instant and powerful response, but most of the time what Will called an *e pluribus unum* case—one out of many—got only slightly more attention than a stolen car. Roca was ambitious. If the chief showed an interest in the case or if one of the chief's friends were

connected, then the newest of Metro's detectives was sure to move it to the top of the pile.

Shayne walked back to the garage to wait. He had been careful not to disturb, not even touch anything. And it was a good thing. Roca, being new, was a stickler for details and procedure. If the cop had to take down a witness, even a friend of the chief, for messing with evidence, then so be it.

THE REDHEAD'S THOUGHTS WERE DISTURBED BY THE screech of tires in front. He had started around the corner to lead the patrolmen to the body when he noticed the car was a mag-wheeled Dodge jacked up a good foot in the rear. Two guys about his size were standing at the front door. One had on a University of Miami t-shirt, and the other a jacket like Gaines'.

"Larry, if you don't get your butt out here," called one, "we're gonna get back what you owe us the hard way."

"You guys want something?" Shayne said as he surprised them.

"Who the hell are you?" said the taller of the two.

"A friend of Larry's from the bakery," said the detective.

The other one said, "You don't work there. What's going on?"

"Maybe you two can help me. Do you know where Larry's been the last couple of nights?"

"Come on, Sam," said one. "I ain't in the mood for no quiz show."

As they started across the lawn to their car, a squad car came swerving around the corner and stopped behind the Dodge.

"Oh shit!" said the one called Sam.

"Hey, guys," said the redhead, "I've got a little choice for you. You can talk to me or you can talk to my good friends, the police."

"Why should we talk to either of you?"

"Because, maggots," said Shayne, killing his smile, "there's a dead body in the garage, and those cops will take a real interest in what two outstanding citizens like you are doing here."

"We'll take our chances."

"When they find out from me that you know the guy who lives here and they examine that car of yours, you know, the one with the custom mag wheels and who knows what in the trunk or the place you live, and . . ."

"You don't have to draw the whole picture, buddy."

"What do you want to know?" said Sam.

SHAYNE IDENTIFIED HIMSELF TO THE UNIFORMS. MAKING certain he dropped his good friend Will Gentry's name, he pointed the

patrolmen to the garage. While they were busy cordoning off the crime scene from nosey neighbors and waiting for Roca, the big detective went back to his new friends in the front yard.

"That body in the garage," said Sam.

The other one said, "It's not . . ."

"The guy the entire neighborhood just heard you threaten, Larry Gaines," answered Shayne.

"Holy shit! Me and Dex didn't mean what we said."

"A figure of screech," said the redhead.

"Yeah," said Dex. "Larry's a friend of ours. Hey, we even . . ."

"Shut up, banana-head," said Sam.

Shayne followed up. "You even what?"

"Nothing."

"Come on," said the redhead. "Let's go talk to the officers. They're always interested in a good case of nothing." He started toward the back.

"Wait a minute. O.K., you made your point."

Shayne looked at the red S on Dex's jacket. "You both go to Steward too?"

"Did."

"When?"

Sam said, "A couple of years ago."

"Did Larry Gaines ever have Mark Pierce for class?" pressed the redhead.

"Pierce the Prick. Sure. Everybody in the college track had to go through his class. Glad we never had him. I think flunking high school kids turned on that jerk."

"He flunked Larry," said Shayne.

Dex said, "Larry had this football scholarship to FSU or somewhere. When he flunked chem in the fall of his senior year, he got so pissed he chucked the whole school scene. Wouldn't even consider summer school or making up the class."

"So he had it in for Pierce," concluded the detective.

"In," said Dex. "That's an understatement. Thursday night he . . ."

"Clam it, Dex!" urged Sam.

"Let's tell him," said the kid in the letter jacket. "We don't owe Larry nothing. He's the one who stiffed us for almost a grand. How in hell am I going to get my 440 rebuilt?"

Shayne trained his steel-gray eyes on them. "What happened Thursday night?"

"Larry called us. Said he was going to pay us back. When we came

by here, he said he needed some help. Anyway, we all drove over to Steward in the van. Never saw Larry so hot. He chased after Pierce and almost killed him with that chain."

"So help me," added Sam, "we had to pull Larry off him."

Shayne torched a cigarette. Curiosity was almost as strong a habit. "Tell me more about the money."

"Thursday night we brought Larry back here. He was raging like a bull. Probably on something. He told us he'd have the money for sure Saturday morning. Strange, we all used to be good friends—the three musketeers type stuff—but for the last six months he wouldn't have much to do with us."

"Except," added Sam, "when he needed to touch us for some bread."

"Why did Gaines need the money?" continued the redhead.

"Two reasons—drugs and that new broad who's got . . . I mean, who had his mind all messed up."

Shayne knew he shoudn't have been surprised because of what he had seen in the parking lot the night before, but he said, "Gaines was into drugs."

"Shit!" said Sam. "The old lady down at the bakery thinks donuts are the only sweets he delivers. Why do you think he keeps that two-bit job?"

"Tell you the truth," said Dex, "me and Sam were glad to stay away from him. Smoking a little dope's one thing, but dealing. We told him he was headed for trouble, but he wanted to keep that broad."

Shayne was already dreading having to tell Mary Lou Lantern what had happened to Larry Gaines, but the old habit persisted. "Who's the girl?"

"Some broad at Steward. Larry wouldn't say much about her. Never even let us meet her," said Sam.

"Probably afraid we'd try to snake her," said Dex. "Hell, I don't want anything to do with no high school broad."

What the hell, concluded Shayne. None of that was his business. Pierce was paying only to find out who had trashed him. And now that was history.

At that moment the detective noticed a green Ford adding to the traffic congestion out front. A dark-skinned man in a three-piece white suit got out and pointed at him like Uncle Sam. "Mike Shayne, I want you."

VII

"*QUE PASA, ROCA?*" SAID THE REDHEAD.

"Cut the ethnic crap, Shayne. You're the one who called us." He lit up a thin cigar. "What went down here?"

"Looks like suicide," said Shayne. "Note and everything."

"If you touched . . ."

Off to the side Dex and Sam strolled nervously toward the Dodge. Roca whipped around. "Hey, Starsky. You and Hutch hang around. We may want to have a confab later."

They stopped and looked at each other.

"That's a talk, you bozos. Now park it on the front stoop." He turned back to the detective. "Talk with me. Like a black tie and tux, you and dead bodies seem to go together. What's your involvement in this one?"

"A client of mine got mugged. The trail led to Gaines."

"The stiff?"

"Yeah," said Shayne, deciding Roca was never going to qualify as the sensitive man of the 80's.

"What makes you think suicide?"

"Like I just said, the note and the m.o."

"Any idea why this Gaines'd punch his own ticket?"

"According to Heckle and Jeckle out front, he's been really messed up lately—drugs and some girl."

"What's the connection between your client getting mugged and this guy cashing in?"

"The way I figure it, Gaines saw the only way out from the pressure was to end it all. But, before he turned on the exhaust, he wanted to settle an old debt, the one he thought had ruined his entire life."

"I take it your client had something to do with that ruining."

"A couple of years ago my client flunked Gaines out of high school, costing him a golden opportunity to play football in college. So, Gaines was stuck in a job that wasn't going anywhere, he owed money he couldn't pay back, he was caught in the middle of the drug scene, and having a rough time with a girl friend. He decided to bail out, but not before beating up my client."

Roca brushed an ash off his lapel. "For once, Shayne, you're making sense. If you're right, this one looks a little too simple for your buddy Rourke to write up for the *Daily News* and turn you into a hero."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"If it wouldn't cause you any inconvenience, perhaps you could stop by the station—like on your way to arrange one of those little fishing trips with Chief Gentry—and give us a statement."

"Always by the book, right, Roca?"

"You got it. If it's worth doing, it's worth doing right."

As the redhead departed, he noticed Roca talking to Dex and Sam. His questions were punctuated with jabs of his lit cigarillo.

THE ADDRESS PIERCE HAD GIVEN HIM WASN'T SO FAR away, so Shayne decided to stop by and give him the whole story personally. The detective admitted to himself that in a strange way he was relieved Larry Gaines was dead. Since he had taken on the case, a fear had been festering in the back of his mind that Pierce might have been using him as a bloodhound: after the detective finds the attacker, the client seeks revenge. Sort of a perverted Golden Rule. Do unto others as they have done unto you—only do it worse.

Pierce lived in a better apartment complex than Shayne would have expected for a high school teacher. The three-story, stucco building topped by red-clay tile rose up from the well-maintained landscaping.

Shayne knocked on the door marked 2B.

Nobody answered.

He knocked again, louder.

In a moment the door opened, and a young woman peered through a chain lock. The detective could see she was wearing a powder-blue, silk lounging dress and her dark hair was pinned loosely atop her head. Her eyes were deep set and heavily, though fashionably, made up. "Yes?" she said in a deep voice.

"Mark Pierce," said Shayne, "is he in?"

"No, I'm afraid not."

"When do you expect him?"

"Any minute now."

Shayne recognized the tone as the one used by a woman who doesn't want to let a stranger know she's alone for any length of time. He looked at his Seiko. "Just tell him Mike was here with some good news. In fact, why don't you have him call me when he gets back."

She gave Shayne a look of puzzlement that was edged in fear.

THE BIG REDHEAD DIDN'T SLEEP WELL THAT NIGHT. HE had spent part of the afternoon explaining to Mary Lou about Larry Gaines, and she had seemed to take the news real hard. The afternoon was shot by the time he finished dictating his statement. And all night his stomach kept reminding him of the late-evening meal he had wolfed down right before bed. Instead of a thick steak at the Beef House to celebrate the end of another case, Lucy had insisted on their eating at the restaurant that adjoined her new health club.

Shayne could have found a missing person faster than a piece of meat

on the Au Naturel menu. When he had objected to a meal consisting of one layer of vegetables on top of another, his beautiful secretary had recited a nursery rhyme she had been taught by her guru, Solarian:

“Red meat, slow feet;
More red meat, no heart beat.”

Shayne hadn't protested; but around midnight when he finally got back to his hotel-apartment, his stomach had. Some steak and eggs smothered in onions had tasted good going down, but all night long it had been scrimmaging in his gut.

He was in the bathroom when the phone rang. He checked the clock as he picked up the receiver. 3:30.

“Shayne,” he said.

“*Que pasa?*” said the sharp voice on the other end.

“Roca, what the hell are you doing calling me at this hour? It better be important.” Shayne could feel his temperature and the onions rising.

“I just thought you'd like to know, Sherlock, that the Great Detective may have been wrong.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your client Mark Pierce . . .”

“How did you find out that?”

“Gaines went to Steward High. Its principal, Brosnahan, checked Gaines' records for me and sure enough the only 'F' on his transcript was in Chemistry, a class taught by none other than Mark Pierce.”

Shayne, remembering what he had let slip out about his client, cursed himself for violating such confidentiality. “Why,” he wondered aloud, “are you so interested in Pierce?”

“We just found him.”

“So?”

“He was in the back of that red Dodge driven by our mutual friends Starsky and Hutch, but a few grams heavier than when you last saw him.”

“You mean?”

“Yeah. Two .38 slugs have taken up permanent residence in the back of his head.”

VIII

SOMETHING WASN'T RIGHT. ROCA HAD A POINT. IF IT were just a matter of Gaines' suicide, the redhead could buy it. Obviously, though, Mark Pierce didn't hide in the trunk of a car and shoot himself in the back of the head. And the more Shayne thought about his former client's death, the more he began to question what

had happened to Gaines. He had been in the business long enough to recognize that Pierce had been executed. Gaines was into drugs. Somebody had to be supplying them. Shayne's best guess was a connection between Gaines' drugs and Pierce's gang-style elimination.

The big detective lit up another Camel. It tasted bitter. Maybe it was just that he hadn't been able to get back to sleep, or maybe the fire in his gut came from being burned. How much more involved in the whole thing were Sam and Dex? He had thought they were telling the truth—just two guys who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time—but the way his deductions were going the pair could have been Leopold and Loeb.

Wrong—that was the key term. It looked like he had read this whole thing wrong, and that bothered him more than no sleep or the lingering taste of onions.

The rope was unraveling, and one of the strands was the mysterious girl—or make that two girls. Who was the woman at Pierce's apartment? Why was she so scared? And what about the femme fatale in Gaines' life, the one his friends claimed had messed him up? Of course, if Dex and Sam were more involved than they had let on, maybe the girl didn't exist at all.

Shayne saw one reflection in the pool of his ignorance clearly—this case wasn't closed, not by a damned sight. Sure, he wouldn't get paid a fee, but that didn't matter. Sometimes a man had to work for personal satisfaction.

AFTER A HOT SHOWER, A LONG SHAVE, AND A TALL V-8 laced with Martell, he didn't feel much better. Throughout the morning he kept calling Pierce's number, but no one answered. Finally out of pure frustration, the redhead drove over to Pierce's apartment. When no one answered the door, he picked the lock in less than ten seconds.

The place was immaculate enough to be a model apartment to show prospective tenants. Not a piece of dirt, no paper on the floor. No clothes thrown over the furniture, and there was even a cover on the typewriter. He checked the closets and the bathroom. Whoever the mysterious woman was, she was a visitor, not a permanent resident.

A dead end.

Shayne hadn't run into many of those in his career, but when he did, he had found his best bet was to put it in reverse and to doublecheck where he'd been.

Getting back in the Buick, he called Peewee Shrike on his mobile phone. A recording device told him, "I'm not home now, but if you want to have a good time, meet me at the track behind Steward High."

The redhead shoved it in Drive.

WHEN SHAYNE WHEELED THE BUICK INTO THE MSHS parking lot, the scene was completely different from what he had encountered Friday night. This time the lot looked like a car dealership—old cars, new cars, sedans, shiny cars, beat-up models. Toward the track a crowd had gathered, and they were all adults.

As he walked closer, Shayne could see the crowd's attention was directed toward the center of the oval track. There, Peewee and a few students were demonstrating various skills. As he looked closer, he saw a kid with leg braces being shown how to throw a softball. A few yards away a short, heavy-set boy was learning to jump over a bar scarcely two feet off the ground. Some kids were running on the track while others practiced the long jump.

Peewee, spotting the detective, motioned him over. "Glad you decided to volunteer, Red. These kids could always use another helping hand." He gave Shayne a long, red ribbon and stretched it between them across the track. Grinning broadly, he said, "Here they come. Hold on tight."

Shayne looked down the track. Strung out over a twenty-yard space, ten or so kids of all sizes hurried toward the ribbon. Some were laughing, some wore determined looks, but all were intent on the finish line.

Suddenly the blond-haired kid in the lead looked back over his shoulder.

Shayne watched in disbelief as the leader turned around and ran back around the final turn where a dark-haired girl was laboring stiff-legged. Taking her hand, the blond runner turned around and urged her on. The adults at track-side began to yell and clap. Everybody inside the oval stopped what they were doing and concentrated on the track. A hundred plus people were pulling for the girl.

As the runners broke the finish one by one, Peewee looked like a proud father. "Hold your position," he shouted to Shayne. "We have to let everybody cross the finish line."

The blond boy was holding the girl's hand as they broke the reheld ribbon. Peewee scooped up both of them in his huge arms and bounced them in celebration. "Way to go, Brenda," he yelled, setting the girl on the ground. He turned to the boy. As he locked his eyes on the boy's face, he slowly mouthed words of congratulations and made gestures with his hands that Shayne had seen people use to communicate with the deaf.

"One smile from my kids," said Peewee, turning to Shayne, "means

more to me than this baby." He pointed to the SuperBowl ring on his finger.

BY MID-AFTERNOON SHAYNE KNEW WHAT HE MEANT. AND it was just the tonic the big redhead needed. So much of his time was spent in a world where people thought only of themselves, where progress was measured by the number of people you stepped on and by the amount of pain you dealt out, where alienation was a way of life. But training kids for the Special Olympics was proof of what he often forgot—that the coin had two sides.

His sleeves rolled up and his body still dripping sweat, he collapsed in Peewee's air-conditioned living room. He was exhausted, but unlike the drained feeling of early that morning, this was a good tired.

The huge coach handed him a beer and sprawled out in an easy chair. "I needed that."

Shayne smiled through tired lips. "You do this every weekend?"

"Just about. You know, Mike, these kids are why I get so mad at some of my players. I mean, did you see how hard those handicapped kids try, how they busted it. All for the pure joy of participation, not just winning. Hell, if I could get my team to put out half that effort, we'd be state champions in a walk." He picked up a card and read. "Let me win. But if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt."

"What's that?"

"The Special Olympics oath." He retreated to the kitchen and returned with two more Lites. "Hey, Sherlock, I know you enjoyed yourself this afternoon, but you didn't come out there just to be a coach."

"Always the armchair detective, Peewee." Still breathing hard, Shayne was glad he wasn't at Lucy's. Instead of a beer, he'd have gotten a lecture on the evils of smoking. "Do you remember a kid named Larry Gaines?"

"Sure. Used to play ball for me."

"They found him dead the other day."

"So I heard. Didn't surprise me a bit."

"What do you mean?"

"Gaines was a bad actor."

"Wasn't he good enough to get a college scholarship?"

"Who you kidding? That guy couldn't have gotten one from Podunk U. Sure he had the talent, but he wouldn't pay the price. I kicked him off the squad for smoking dope. You know, he's the kind of kid I was just talking about. Had it all, but didn't take advantage. What happened to him?"

"Suicide maybe, but I'd like to find out."

"I thought you were working for Pierce?"

"I was."

"Was?"

"Pierce was shot last night."

"Geez," said the huge man as he collapsed back into his easy chair.

"I used to let him lift weights with the team. What happened?"

"That's another thing I want to find out. Something's going on, and the center of it is Steward. I've got to figure out a way to get to the bottom."

Peewee stared into his beer can as if he were gazing into a crystal ball. "I got an idea. I heard you told Brosnahan and Jacobs you were my new defensive coach. Well, the good book says 'Thou shalt not lie.' So let's just say I'm going to keep a good boy from going bad."

"How?"

"Simple. I watched you out there today. You wouldn't be lying if tomorrow afternoon I introduced you to the squad as our new defensive coach."

IX

AS SHAYNE PASSED THROUGH THE DOOR THAT LED FROM the locker room to the practice field, he spotted Peewee's sign overhead and broke into a trot. The redhead didn't have to be told RUN—DON'T WALK. It had been a frustrating morning downtown, and he needed the exercise almost as much as he needed some information.

Roca's mouth had been hermetically sealed. His single admission was public knowledge: one Anthony Samuel Fredericks and a Dexter Rose had been charged with Murder One. The lieutenant wouldn't let the detective speak to them, and if Roca had anything other than Pierce's body being found in their car, he wasn't saying.

Stripped down to his sneakers and shorts, Peewee was gathering the team around him. "Hey, guys," he said turning in Shayne's direction, "I want you to meet my new coach. Mike was a two-time All-American, and we played opposite each other in a couple of Pro Bowls. Believe me, old Stonewall was right up there with Butkus and Huff."

Under his breath, Shayne said to the coach, "Whatever happened to 'Thou shalt not lie'?"

Shrike put Shayne with the offensive line, which he had described as having "more holes than Swiss cheese." It had been a long time since the redhead had knocked heads on the gridiron. It had been a long time since he had been on the gridiron. Hell, he wasn't even sure what

gridiron meant. What impressed him immediately was the difference in the size of the teenagers since he had played. Some of these had to weigh in well over two hundred pounds.

The redhead stared at the twelve sides of beef. "Which of you guys is the best?"

A tree trunk smiled through missing teeth at him.

"Bull be the one," came a voice.

"Com'mere, Bull," said Shayne. "You and I are going to lock horns."

The tree trunk sauntered forward with an "I'm gonna kick your ass" smirk on his pimply face.

"Here's the situation," said Shayne. "I'm the defensive lineman. Your job is to keep me from getting to your running back." He pitched a ball to one of the smaller linemen. "You be the runner."

"That's all," said Bull contemptuously. "Don't you want to put on some protection, at least take out some insurance?"

The crowd mirrored his smirk.

"Tell you what, Bull. If you can take me out of the play, I'll run ten laps after practice. If you can't, you'll run."

"Hey, Stan," said Bull, "call my mom. Tell her I'll be home from practice early."

The mammoth kid got down in a three-point stance. Shayne crouched in front of him.

"You go inside," said Bull to the runner. "I'm taking old Stonewall outside."

Another kid yelled "Hike!" Bull exploded forward. Shayne ducked under his forearms. Bringing up his hands into the kid's armpits, he lifted him off the ground and hurled him back.

He tumbled into the runner, and they both collapsed in a heap. There was momentary silence. Then the other players started to chuckle.

Bull spit on the grass. "I wasn't ready."

The redhead smiled wryly. "Double or nothing?"

This time Bull lunged forward, Shayne played the matador. Sidestepping quickly, he caught Bull on the back of his shoulderpads, shoved him forward, and smashed into the exposed runner.

Bull got up slowly, all the while glaring at Shayne.

"It's all technique," said the redhead.

The kid's face changed shape. "What do I do, coach?"

The rest of practice Shayne reached again and again into his bag of experience. He had to admit that Bull and his teammates were quick-learners. The afternoon had brought back a lot of memories—good ones. Maybe if things had been different, instead of drilling for oil

wells and chasing suspects, he might have been chasing, then drilling ball-carriers.

THE REDHEAD WAS FOLLOWING THE TEAM INTO THE locker room when he noticed a solitary figure slowly circling the oval track. Bull was laboring on his second trip around the course as Shayne caught up with him.

"Hey, coach, you think these laps'll help my foot speed?"

Slowing down to keep pace, Shayne said, "It can't hurt." On the next turn, he added, "You've got real potential, Bull."

"Call me Ted, coach."

"O.K., Ted. You know, you remind me of a kid who was here two years ago. Same potential, but he didn't have guts. You remember Larry Gaines?"

"He was a senior when I was a sophomore," panted the kid. "Smart alec. Coach Shrike got rid of him. I seen him hanging round the school occasionally this year. He's got smokes and pills. Always flashing money."

"Yeah, I hear he's also got a girl friend who still goes here."

"If you're worried about me, coach, I don't have squat to do with him. 'Bout the only one of us that ever talks to him is Billy Lawson, the receiver."

Shayne nodded.

"They're from the same neighborhood," continued Bull.

At the end of the lap, the kid said, "Coach, how come you're interested in Gaines and his girl?"

"Call it curiosity. Like I say, you've got real potential. I don't want to see you end up the same way. Say, you want to quit now?"

"Hell, no," said the kid, picking up his speed. "I got sixteen laps to go, and mom'll only hold supper so long."

Shayne found Billy Lawson in the shower. Pitching him a towel, the redhead said, "I hear you were pretty good friends with Larry Gaines."

"Who told you that?" said the lanky black kid.

"Just heard the word."

"Me and Larry were never friends. We never hung around together. That dude was bad news." The kid slipped on a t-shirt with EARTH, WIND, and FIRE stencilled across it. "The man was a walking drug store."

"Did you ever meet his girl friend?"

"I seen him pick up his squeeze a few times after school, but I can't say I really know anything about them."

"How about her name?"

"That I know. She's in my Chem class when she's there. Marsha . . . Marsha Rainey."

TUESDAY MORNING SHAYNE WAS STANDING OUTSIDE THE Chem lab waiting for second period to start. Amidst the milling crowd of students, he spotted Brosnahan about the same time the principal caught sight of him.

"I've been looking for you," said the portly man, still in a bow tie. "I haven't yet received any official word about your being here."

"I'm a volunteer," said Shayne. "You know, like the people who donate their time for blood drives and the Special Olympics."

"Oh," said Brosnahan, momentarily taken back. "Well, keep up the good work."

Shayne was meditating on the truth of the Peter Principle, that everybody rises to the height of incompetence, when he spotted Phil Jacobs coming toward him. The teacher was talking with a girl who had a mature but tired look. About the size of the girl he had seen in Pierce's apartment, she had her dark hair in pony tails and was wearing a gray sweatshirt and jeans. When Jacobs turned in front of him, she continued down the hall.

"The coach," said Jacobs in recognition. "If you thought things were bad on Friday, I can guess how you felt finding out that a teacher had been killed over the weekend."

"Yeah," said Shayne. "I can see why you want to get out. Listen, can you tell me where I can find Marsha Rainey?"

"Any reason?"

"Just an errand for Brosnahan."

"Well then, you just missed her. That was Marsha I was talking to a minute ago."

"I thought she had class with you this period?"

"She does, but she wasn't feeling too good. That's what she was talking about. She's going home for the day."

"Thanks."

Shayne started sprinting down the hallway, weaving in among various groups of students. He caught her at the front door just as the second-period bell rang.

"Hi," he said to her. "I'm a new football coach here."

"Hello," she said, not raising her eyes from the floor.

"You're Marsha Rainey?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"Some of the players were talking about Larry's death. They wanted me to tell you how sorry they were."

"I don't want to talk about it." She covered her face with her hands, letting her books drop to the terrazo floor. "Ever since I transferred here from California, it's just been one bad thing after another."

The redhead picked up her books and handed them to her. "I'm sorry . . ."

"You just don't understand," she screamed. "Leave me alone."

Before she could say anything she went running through the front doors and past the flag pole, where Old Glory was flying at half-mast.

"Teenagers," said a voice behind him.

It was Brosnahan.

"Kids," he repeated. "They're all crazy."

X

THE BIG DETECTIVE STARED IMPATIENTLY THROUGH THE cloud of cigar smoke at Roca.

"I told you, Shayne, I don't care if you *are* the Chief's fishing buddy, I'm not giving you anything. So why don't you vamoose back to that sleazy office of yours?"

"May as well. You already know about Gaines' drug connection," said the redhead, baiting his hook.

"So what if the guy was busted a year ago for Mary Jane." Roca blew a swirl of smoke at Shayne.

"I was talking about the next line on his yellow sheet, his dealing."

"Dealing?" said Roca, circling the bait.

Shayne rose up from the metal chair as if to go. "Yeah, the delivery van, those late-night trips to the school yard. He may have been supplied by that gang—what's their name?"

"Las Serpientes, impossible. You don't know crap. Those jerks are nothing but penny-ante. A little strong-arm, a little grass, and if they get lucky, an ounce of horse that's been stepped on more times than a turd on a race track."

"I've heard that Devil Dust is pretty potent."

"So potent Gaines probably didn't know what he was doing to himself the other night, but back to my point, wise guy. That synthetic stuff's so new we haven't been able to get a big enough score to analyze it yet. About all they can tell us is the stuff smells like rotten onions, but there's no way those minor league Pancho Villas have anything to do with something that big."

"Then Gaines must have gotten it from Las Serpientes' competition," said the redhead.

"That's what's really driving the guys in Narco nuts. The stuff's been circulating a couple of months and they can't . . ." He ground

out his cigar and stood up. "Get the hell out of here, Shayne. I told you I wasn't giving you a thing."

The detective, realizing that he had caught his limit, decided to move on to the next fishing hole.

SHAYNE MARVELLED AT THE ARTISTRY OF THE OUTDOOR mural. Illuminated by a dim streetlight, the madonna-like woman in white cradling an infant in a rainbow blanket seemed to offer hope from its position on the tenement's flaking stucco wall. Too bad some barrio art critic had retouched it with black spray paint.

When the last one had entered the gutted storefront, the redhead drew his piece and walked in. As loud as the Latin music was, it didn't drown out the stench of sweat and cheap beer. The cans and broken glass crunched beneath his size 12's, but the inhabitants were too preoccupied with their music and their women. Luckily, before slipping the hook from Roca's mouth, he had been able to get the address of Las Serpientes' headquarters.

He was almost to Miguel when somebody spotted him.

"Miguel, *ten cuidado!*"

The leader had just tossed a droopy-eyed teenage girl from his lap when Shayne reached him. As Miguel opened his mouth to yell something, the redhead rammed the .38's barrel between his lips. "If anybody does anything foolish, pal, you're going to get one of Dr. Smith and Wesson's emergency tonsillectomies."

Nobody said a word, especially Miguel.

Sliding the barrel out of the gang leader's mouth, but keeping it close enough so he could smell the machine oil, Shayne said, "I want some info, pronto."

"Sucker's from The Prof," said a voice.

"Why'd you kill Larry Gaines?" said Shayne, throwing in another fishing line.

Miguel squirmed. "Didn't kill no Gaines. We just wanted him and that *chica* out of our territory."

"Who's The Prof?"

Miguel was silent.

Shayne cocked the hammer and started to reinsert his metal tongue depressor.

"We don't know," said the Hispanic. "He's just The Prof, the guy who gave Gaines the Devil Dust. Now, if we could find The Prof, we'd kill that bastard."

"I hate to ruin your day," said the detective, "but somebody beat you to it."

AS SHAYNE PICKED THE LOCK INTO STEWARD'S SCIENCE area, he was putting things together. For the first time the puzzle was starting to make sense. Gaines had taken Sam and Dex to Pierce Thursday night to get their money. He wasn't still mad at Pierce—he was in business with him. He knew Pierce had money. And, decided the redhead, if he didn't miss his guess, the proof was in the school.

It took the detective ten minutes to find what he wanted in the Chemistry Laboratory. Springing the only file cabinet, he lifted out some containers. One in back with large crystals was labelled NaCl. One sniff reeking with wild onions told him it wasn't table salt.

He'd have bet the ranch that this time Roca would welcome him with open arms. And if the white substance was what he thought, the boys in Narcotics would have plenty of Devil Dust to analyze.

Gaines, Pierce, and a chica—a pretty lady. Two of those were dead, and everything suggested the lady had something to do with their deaths. But who was the lady?

The girl at Pierce's apartment or Marsha Rainey?

XI

10:10. NOT TOO LATE TO DROP BY HIS SECRETARY'S, Shayne thought. Over the years he had evolved the habit of talking over a perplexing case with Lucy. Since she was usually current with whatever he was working on, sometimes she would have a good insight, and other times just hearing himself talk gave him the perspective he needed.

"Who is it?" she asked as he rang the bell.

"Me, Angel."

"Oh, Michael, I'm not ready," she called as she unlatched the door. "I wasn't expecting you . . . I mean I just got back from Solarian's."

Shayne opened the door into her living room and found it empty.

"Whatever you think," she called from the bedroom, "I don't want to hear 'I told you so'."

The redhead parked himself on his favorite green couch and looked down at the coffee table. Her usual *Cosmopolitan* and *Woman's World* had been replaced by *Shape*, *Fit*, and *New Body*. There was nothing wrong with Lucy's body the way it was, and if anybody knew that, he did. "What did Solarian tempt you with this time, Angel?"

"You'll have to wait a minute. How's the Pierce investigation going?"

"It's become a case of *cherchez la femme fatale*," he said, inserting a Camel between his lips.

"How do you like your new femme fatale?" she asked as she suddenly appeared in her bedroom doorway.

The cigarette dropped from Shayne's mouth as he looked up. "What the hell?"

Instead of the pert brunette, he was looking at the Queen of Punk Rock. Her hair had been sculpted and stretched upward like a grotesque rooster comb. Her face was cocooned with luminescent-blue eye shadow and matching lipstick. On her right cheek was what looked like a gold star tattoo. Her body was covered with a black, fishnet body stocking ornamented with gold stars.

As she approached him, she said, "Solarian calls this his 'Night in Heaven' look."

Shayne said, "Lucy, if I didn't know it was you . . ."

"I know. Isn't it great? Solarian said I'd be totally different."

Shayne stood up abruptly and bolted for the front door.

"Michael," she called to the closing door, "was it something I said?"

THE REDHEAD KNOCKED ON THE APARTMENT DOOR. HE had made more wrong guesses on this case than any he could remember. Why hadn't he seen the solution from the first?

The sleepy-eyed figure opened the door slowly. "Red," he said, "what time is it?"

"Get your trenchcoat, Peewee. You're coming with me."

THEY HAD GONE INTO THE SCHOOL THROUGH THE MAIN doors.

"Brosnahan'll hang our butts from the flagpole," said Peewee, "if he finds out what we're doing."

Shayne would have preferred simply to pick the lock, but he didn't know where the records were kept. Besides, now they weren't technically breaking and entering.

"Follow me," urged the football coach, leading the rawboned redhead into the principal's office and pointing to a set of file cabinets.

The detective flipped through the manila folders until he came to the one he wanted. The one with Marsha Rainey's home address.

"307, 309," CALLED OUT PEEWEE AS THE BUICK SLOWLY crept down the darkened street. "311, 315."

Shayne stopped the car.

"Near as I can tell, Red, 313 should be right there."

The private investigator stared at the vacant lot between the two

houses. He should have known it wasn't going to be easy.

"You're the detective, Red," said the huge figure beside Shayne. "What do we do now?"

"If you can tell me another address, we're golden. If not, it's back to the school."

THE LIGHTS WERE STILL ON AT THE CORAL GABLES RANCH-style. Shayne spotted a woman's slender silhouette against the living room sheers. He knocked.

After a moment the latch snapped and a familiar face appeared. Seeing Shayne, the woman tried to slam the door shut, but the redhead shoved it backward, sending her sprawling into a potted palm.

Stepping in, Shayne looked down at the beautiful, dark-haired woman. She had on the same blue-silk dress she had been wearing Saturday at Mark Pierce's apartment.

The mystery lady. "Hello, Marsha," Shayne said.

"How did you figure it out?" she said, getting to her feet. "I kept my face hidden in the hallway at school. I even choked up my voice, and my ponytails and jeans were enough to fool everybody else."

Making a mental note that he owed Lucy for the tip Solarian's makeover had given him, the detective said, "No matter if it's the before or after look, lady, you still smell of Devil Dust and death."

"What are you trying to pin on me?"

"Two murders and the destruction of who knows how many kids from the dope."

"Two murders?"

"Larry Gaines and Mark Pierce."

She laughed. "The police say Gaines committed suicide."

"They won't when they examine the typewriter in Pierce's apartment," said Shayne, never tiring of fishing, "the typewriter with your prints on it, the typewriter you used to write Gaines' suicide note."

"But he signed it."

"There's no way you could know that, unless you saw the note itself, the one that the police haven't released yet. I'd bet dollars to donuts that the torn sheet was part of a letter he signed; maybe even one he sent to his girlfriend Marsha Rainey."

Her face told him he had a strike. "As Marsha," he continued, "you played the part of a student to get in with the drug crowd at Steward. It was easy to spot the losers, the ones you could recruit. Then, all dolled up like you are now, you were the *chica* Las Serpientes saw with Gaines on his drug runs."

"If only you hadn't come by Pierce's apartment while I was clearing out any evidence of my being there."

"Yeah, that helped tie things together. Poor Mark Pierce. Just trying to survive on a teacher's salary till he saw his chance to grab the gold ring."

"What do you mean?"

"He stumbled on to your operation and wanted a share. Something had to be done. Larry had probably cried in his beer more times than once about how he hated Pierce for ruining his life. What an easy mark."

"You said it. He really was a loser."

"How," said the redhead, "did you get him to go after Pierce that night in the gym?"

"Gaines was so hung up on me that all I had to do was tell him it was quits between us because I had fallen for Pierce. And if those two jerks hadn't been with Gaines the other night, I'm sure he would have gotten rid of Pierce for me."

"But Gaines blew that."

"Such was the story of his pitiful life. Then he started talking too much. It was just a matter of time before he spilled everything to the wrong people. Friday night he was so high on that Dust he didn't know what was happening to him."

Shayne knew what came next. "Drugs didn't bother Pierce, but murder did."

"Pierce came down with a bout of creeping morality. Started making noises about going to the police. He'd hired you—it wasn't hard to believe Miami's finest were next."

"And it probably wasn't that hard to put a bullet in Pierce's head and shove him in the back of Gaines' friends' car."

"They deserved the blame. They'd screwed up the plan to get rid of Pierce in the first place." She cocked her head. "Since you're so good at figuring things out, tell me why I'm telling you everything."

"That's easy, but the answer threw me till a little while ago. Devil Dust was new, a synthetic. It had to be produced somewhere." Recalling the crystals he had discovered, he said, "A high school chemistry lab was the perfect cover for The Prof, the man I was told produced the stuff. But Pierce wasn't the only teacher with access to the chem lab. There was somebody else, somebody with a Ph. D. in chemistry. Why, I asked myself, would anybody with such a degree be teaching in an inner city high school. It certainly wasn't dedication. You had a partner, the guy who pays the rent on this house, a guy who came here from California, the same place you said you'd transferred

from."

"You get an A for deduction, buddy," said a voice from behind him, "but you're not going to get the opportunity to show anybody your report card."

"Hello, Jacobs," said the big detective without turning around. "I was wondering when you'd show yourself."

"For a dumb football coach, you had this figured well."

"Let's just say I'm an expert at X's and O's and I fished a lot."

"Too bad the fisherman's going to join the fishes at the bottom of Biscayne Bay." The teacher cocked the hammer. "Well, Marcy, guess we'll be moving on again, but as long as there's dope, there'll be kids stupid enough to use it."

Jacobs heard the front door splinter, but he couldn't turn in time to see what hit him. Two hundred and sixty pounds of Peewee Shrike plowed into the lanky teacher. Pitched forward, Jacob's chin made the redhead's pile-driver right an offer it couldn't refuse.

All Jacobs' muscles went limp, and he crumbled to the floor like a pile of dirty laundry.

"Glad I didn't drop you at your place, Peewee," said Shayne, "but I'm gonna have to throw the yellow flag at you for that last move. Worst case of clipping I ever saw."

"WHEN YOU RAN OUT ON ME LAST NIGHT, MICHAEL, YOU made me take a good look at myself. I like me the way I was." Lucy took another bite of the charcoaled steak. "I don't want to be another Solarian creation."

Shayne looked at her plate so covered with sauces and starches it would have driven the health guru to lace his papaya juice with grain alcohol. "Are you still going to get up at 6:00 tomorrow morning to jog?"

"No," she smiled across the candlelight. "I plan to get all the exercise I need—tonight."

NEXT MONTH

Mike Shayne returns in another thrilling adventure.

DON'T MISS IT!

We went on the ship, of course. Money was a factor, with a strong dose of morbid curiosity slinking close behind —and a fascination to see what these unsuspecting souls would collect for a bizarre voyage with a potential pot of gold at its end!

Death Cruise

by MIKE TAYLOR

THE SECOND TIME I KILLED LORENZO STAUNTON I MADE certain I got it right.

John Nanovic, pragmatic editor of *Crime Busters*, had returned my latest piece of deathless prose along with half a page of scathing comments. They centered on the patent absurdity of having a character murdered via a remote control device which, when attuned to the victim's central nervous system, caused a fatal stroke.

I'd thought it was a fairly clever idea.

After letting the story simmer for a couple of days I decided to rewrite, using the time-honored method of poison mushrooms to eliminate the unfortunate Mr. Staunton. Since all I knew about the deadlier side of the fungi family was that they grew in the woods, presumably in springtime, a visit to the library seemed called for.

I convinced my good friend and fellow midwesterner, Walt Morrell (whose surname should have qualified him as something of an expert) to play hooky from the typewriter for an afternoon. One fine early fall day in 1937 we caught a streetcar out to the Bronx municipal library.

All of which is mostly prelude to what follows, except that it was during our trip to the library I first realized I was being tailed. Now, I've used the old saw "I sensed someone was watching me" in any number of my own stories. The reality of such an occurrence is a whole

'nother thing.

We had separated, me to the botanical section, while Walt studiously updated his knowledge of the Gashouse Gang. I was into my third reference volume, engulfed in the class *Basidiomycetes* and other obscure fungal relations, when I had that singular, indescribable sensation of being watched. I glanced up and saw the man.

He wasn't particularly noteworthy as he stepped behind a stack of books: small, sharp-featured, slightly balding, wearing a gray-and-blue checked jacket, no tie. His eyes caught mine briefly, slipped away, and he was gone. I realized, without really thinking about it, that I had seen him before. Where?

I replayed my recent past. Yesterday, coming out of the subway. The day before, at the cafeteria where Fred Nebel and I had had lunch. Last weekend, on the weathered platform of the train depot at Southold, the small Long Island town where Elizabeth and I were now living—

I was up and after him, the certainty that he was deliberately following me crystallizing even as I moved. Three times in so short a period surely spoke for more than coincidence. He had disappeared behind the reference stacks, HID to IND, and when I rounded them he was nowhere in sight. I rushed down a short corridor, found myself in medieval literature, still alone. I charged a blind corner and nearly trampled a young lady with an armload of books. By the time that got straightened out I had lost him.

"You're sure this isn't just a reaction to all that's happened?" Walt asked carefully when I told him about it. "You've been through a lot lately."

I glared at him. "Elizabeth has been through a lot. I'm doing just fine. Why would I imagine something like this?"

He shrugged. "Go home and write about your mushrooms. Say hi to Liz for me. I'll see you at the Guild luncheon Friday."

I WALKED FROM THE TRAIN STATION TO THE LITTLE bungalow on the shore of Southold Bay. The sun was setting ahead of me, a bit further down the old fishing pier every day. With some shock I realized that my wedding anniversary was less than a month away.

What an incredible, maddening, frightening year it had been.

NOTE: At this point William Bryant's journal contains a detailed, somewhat personal reflection on his wife's presumed drowning in South Florida and subsequent reappearance in a Naples mental hospital half a year later. I've chosen to delete it, both for clarity and out of respect for their privacy. For those who have read "Terror Key" (MSMM, Jan 83) a brief explanation: During the shooting incident

inside the smugglers' hideout, Elizabeth Bryant was wounded and thrown into the whirlpool that drained the cave. The powerful current dragged her down and under about a hundred feet of coral, spewing her to the surface on the other side of the headland. Dazed and weak, she was carried away on the outgoing tide, to be picked up later that night by a shrimp boat navigating the tortuous channels of the Ten Thousand Islands. Shock from exposure and the wound had rendered her senseless; she did not know whom or where she was. Because of the abrupt departure from Jonas Wilder's villa, she carried no identification. Elizabeth was taken to shore and turned over to the authorities. The loss of memory persisted for months, until the following spring when, gradually healing, her mind finally bridged the gap back to reality. After being notified of her whereabouts in "Goblin Farm" (MSMM, Jul 83) William Bryant rejoined her. The subsequent recovery was rapid. Following a short period of hospitalization they went back to New York, where their lives slowly began to return to normal. Here the story continues.

IT APPEARED THAT WE HAD COMPANY. A SPARKING NEW gray Ford coupe was parked in the gravel drive. As I opened the screen door I was met by two arms flung solidly around my neck and Elizabeth's welcoming kiss. I held her a moment, while over her shoulder I met the cool gaze of the man sitting at one end of the davenport. I didn't know him.

"Darling, this is Mr. Clive Armes. He's an attorney. And he is being very mysterious. He wouldn't tell me what his business was until you arrived."

Something, a premonition perhaps, cast a cloud over my thoughts as I stepped forward to shake the man's hand. He rose and half-bowed. Tall, severe, veddy, veddy British in his tweeds and high collar. He looked a good deal like young Rathbone, the actor.

"Mr. Bryant. I am delighted to meet you. I come bearing a two-edged sword—that is, I have some good news which, by its nature, contains some rather startling revelations for your wife. I am familiar with the recent turmoil in your life, Mrs. Bryant. That is why I resolved to have your husband present before I proceeded."

I looked at Elizabeth. She shrugged. "The doctors say my recovery is complete, Mr. Armes. We appreciate your concern. At the moment, however, I'm more ravaged by curiosity than trepidation. Please go ahead."

"Yes, please do," I said. Why is it whenever Americans are around an Englishman we invariably begin parroting their phraseology? Must

have something to do with a colonial complex.

Anyway, Armes sat, I sat, Elizabeth sat. He cleared his throat, laid a thin briefcase on his knees, snapped it open, drew out a sheaf of papers.

"Now then. I am currently in the process of settling the estate of my employer, the late Horace Dundee. You know of him, I'm sure. Patriarch of the most politically powerful family in the state. Kingmaker of mayors and governors. Extremely wealthy, especially after the Volsted Act, which he was rumored to have circumvented in grand fashion. He died quietly, early last week, in his mansion overlooking the Hudson."

"He's left me something in his will!" Elizabeth cried, half-joking, half-hopefully, clapping her hands. The medical bills had drained our resources and then some.

"Actually, that is quite true. A very peculiar legacy. Mrs. Bryant, I fear I must put this bluntly—were you ever given any indication that you were an adopted child?"

Elizabeth became very still. I squeezed her hand. "No," she said finally, quietly, almost making a question of it.

"Then you understand my hesitancy in bringing this up in light of your recent travail. Perhaps if I just told you the facts, as I have pieced them together . . ."

"You might as well," I said shortly. "You're already past the point of no return."

"Oh, my. So I am. Well, Horace Dundee was, how shall I say, a profligate individual. Three wives, numberless mistresses, a reputation for having tasted life to the fullest. He left a will of some complexity. Basically it acknowledges his parentage of a number of children conceived out of wedlock. Including yourself, I'm afraid, Mrs. Bryant. In each case Mr. Dundee arranged for the immediate adoption of these offspring. Judging from his notes, it appears he screened the prospective parents personally and quite thoroughly. All of the children went into well-to-do New York families. He apparently never attempted to establish contact with any of them, although there is evidence that he kept some track of their lives. To make a long story short, besides his legitimate heirs, the will includes those children born outside of marriage. Is all this clear so far?"

Elizabeth chuckled beside me. "It certainly is. Believe me, Mr. Armes, after what I have been through lately, this revelation is not going to shatter my life. I shall always hold the parents who raised me in loving memory. They were killed, you may recall, some years ago in a Tri-motor crash. So, pray tell, what have I inherited?"

I never loved her more than right then.

"That is perhaps the strangest and most complicated of all," the lawyer said. "Mr. Dundee's will is constructed in two parts. The first sets forth certain conditions. The second, still sealed, bestows the inheritances—but only upon those who have complied with the first part. It is that requirement I am here to deliver."

"You should have been a writer," I grumbled. "Never use ten words when a hundred will do. Get on with it."

He flushed. "Yes, of course. In accordance with the deceased's instructions, I have organized a cruise. The liner *Marcatell* has been chartered for two weeks, using funds from the estate. She sails Tuesday for Halifax, Le Havre, and Dover. The passenger list will be comprised of Horace Dundee's children, both legitimate and those acknowledged after his death. Spouses are also invited. Upon our return the second part of the will is to be read and all endowments made. Those who choose not to come or who do not complete the voyage will be excluded."

"Good Lord!" I said. "That's crazy. Can you imagine the tension with all those offspring, legitimate and otherwise, thrown together like that? A floating time bomb."

"Mr. Dundee was renown for a somewhat bleak sense of humor," Armes agreed. But those, in fact, are the provisions. I cannot even surmise if the content of the bequest will be worth the pain of undertaking this trip. It will be a difficult decision, Mrs. Bryant. I must have your answer in two days."

WE WENT OF COURSE. WE DISCUSSED, ARGUED, FOUGHT, changed our minds half a dozen times, and we went. Money was the primary factor, with a strong dose of morbid curiosity slinking close behind. While Elizabeth's newly revealed parent might wind up leaving her no more than a five-pack of Wrigley's, he was reputed to have been very wealthy and, a little fast research revealed, had died between wives. So the bulk of his estate could well be up for grabs in this strange game of sibling confrontation. That was the other thing—a fascination, both on her part and mine, to see what hitherto unsuspecting souls would collect for this bizarre cruise with the potential pot of gold at its end. There was risk, certainly, for her health and for my good standing over several deadlines I was going to miss. But what red-blooded American could pass up an opportunity for instant wealth?

So on a gray Tuesday morning the *Marcatell* was towed from dock, where it turned ponderously and steamed past the Statue of Liberty, through the Narrows, and out into the Atlantic. We were under way.

Because of the small number of passengers (we were outnumbered by the crew) we all had staterooms above deck. That first day was spent in strained greetings and wary appraisals, as the progeny of Horace Dundee circulated around the ship, through the gamerooms and lounges, dining rooms and shuffleboard courts. Most, like ourselves, seemed quietly bemused by the opulent world of the luxury liner.

There were, I soon determined, eight Dundee children in attendance. Four of these carried, or had carried, his name. That left an equal number of—to use Elizabeth's eloquent term—"bastardly money-grubbers," including herself in that dubious roll-call. Also aboard was Clive Armes, two of his junior law partners (read flunkies), and a fussy little man who was constantly taking notes. Maybe he was jotting all this down for posterity.

Instead of describing this assortment as we randomly met them, it would be simpler to rank them according to the seating at the captain's table for dinner that first night out. These assignments obtained throughout the voyage—except for the ominous vacancies that occurred as mistrust and jealousy took over.

The arrangements were thus: Our skipper was a silver-bearded Dutchman, Captain Jan van der Boss. At his right hand sat Ralph Dundee, eldest son and big shop politico, heir to his father's power-structure, with his wife Artis. He was a caricature, overweight and florid-faced, loud voice and big cigar; she was slim, predatory and rapier-tongued.

Next came Jack and Millicent Fox, she being the eldest Dundee sister. Fox was an architect, well-known and respected for his design work on skyscrapers; his wife was a strong-willed lady who had been known to put on a hard-hat and walk a steel girder beside him, twenty stories up.

At her elbow was Clive Armes and on his other side was a pair to conjure with: Patience O'Dell, the silent film star, and her fifth husband, Lester Farrow, late of the Dancing Farrows. It was she who was of recently revealed Dundee stock, still radiant, bubbling, overacting life just as she had in more than a hundred two-reelers. You need only hear her voice to understand why she hadn't survived into the talkies.

Then came a sullen, brooding character: Harry Spivo, dark complected and countenanced, perhaps the result of old Horace's dalliance in the Italian quarter. His line of work I didn't catch, but judging by his manner I suspected it had slowed down considerably around the time of Repeal. Patience's half and slightly younger brother.

Elizabeth and I were next at the big circular table, and beyond us sat one of the loveliest women I had ever seen. Sidra Soames. There was no doubt that her mother had been Asian, possibly Phillipino or Siamese. She had glossy black hair and nutmeg skin. From her father she had inherited western stature and, surprisingly, great blue eyes. I never heard or asked what she did. She just *was*.

Next came Armes' two proteges, Briscoe and Shelorn, dapper young lawyers who seemed ill at ease in these unusual surroundings. Thus the crew of lawyers was situated to form a buffer between the Dundees of record and those just recently acknowledged.

On the other side of them was legitimacy again: a frail creature, youngest of all the children and unmarried, Melissa Dundee. She bore a constant expression of acute distress on her pallid features.

And last but by no means least came Maurice Dundee and his young (third) wife Cheryl. He was a top Broadway producer, rubbed shoulders with Irving Berlin and the Gershwines, dined with the mayor. She was a starlet, full-bodied and empty-headed. They made a swell couple.

The note taker did not dine with us, apparently taking his meals with the crew. We soon had cause to envy him. The first course was scarcely on the table before the sniping started.

"It's a pity Dad had to set up this charade," Maurice Dundee said wearily. "I have important business in New York; my latest play is scheduled to open over the holidays."

"Then why are you here, dear man?" Patience O'Dell countered.

Maurice rolled his thumb and forefinger together. "The same reason as everyone else. Moola. It takes big bucks to produce a hit nowadays. Who could afford to pass this up?"

"Who indeed?" This from the morose one, Melissa. "Although I had hoped *some* people might have shown the decency to do so." She glared at our end of the table. "How quickly the vultures gather."

"Now see here—" Patience began, but Harry Spivo cut her off.

"Don't pay no attention to that broad. She's just scared she'll have to split some of the goodies. Why, we're just one big happy family now. Right, Sister Sidra?"

Sidra shrugged a perfect shoulder, coolly.

Millicent Fox said, "I fail to understand what Father hoped to accomplish, bringing us together after all this time."

Ralph Dundee laughed harshly. "He wanted to find out who his real kids were. The ones greedy enough and tough enough to put up with the rest of the family." He looked around. "Well, it looks like everybody showed. Now all we have to do is keep from killing each

other for a week."

I felt Elizabeth shiver beside me.

LATER, WHILE WE WERE HAVING A BRANDY-AND-SODA nightcap in the A-deck lounge with the Foxes, another bit of nastiness developed. Ralph Dundee thundered in, obviously drunk and very angry, waving a sheet of paper.

"Somebody broke into my cabin! Went through all my stuff and left this. Who's the joker?"

We finally calmed him down enough to get a look at the paper. It said in block letters: YOU'RE NOT FIT TO BE A DUNDEE. A LITTLE MONEY ISN'T WORTH DYING FOR. GET OFF THE SHIP AT HALIFAX.

Harry Spivo came over from the bar, read it painstakingly, lips moving. "Looks like the squeeze is on."

"I will not be threatened!" Dundee roared. "Somebody will pay for this. If you think—"

"Ah, pipe down," Spivo said. "You're not giving a speech now. You're no better than the rest of us here."

"Keep away from me, you two-bit hoodlum!" Ralph Dundee tried to shove the big man aside.

Harry Spivo decked him. "Watch your mouth, fat man. I don't need your—well, well."

As Dundee was struggling to get up, Sidra Soames came into the lounge quietly, also carrying a piece of paper. "I found this in my room. Someone had been through my things."

It was the same note in the same square printing.

"I think we had all better take a look at our quarters," Jack Fox said calmly.

Everyone left but Ralph Dundee, who sat on the edge of a chair, dabbing at his bloody mouth with a handkerchief and glaring hate daggers at Harry Spivo's broad back.

Our door was unlocked. Inside, the suitcases and single trunk showed evidence of having been gone through hastily. Nothing seemed to be missing. The note was lying on my pillow.

"Someone doesn't want to share," Elizabeth said glumly. "But what in the world were they looking for?"

I scratched my chin uneasily. "I don't know. Maybe it was just to further upset us. Odds are that everyone in the family got one of these notes and was ransacked as well."

An angry babble of voices from the outside corridor a few minutes later confirmed that thought. As it turned out, we were all in the same

boat. So to speak.

THE NEXT MORNING WE STEAMED INTO THE HALIFAX harbor. It was a brief stop. The *Marcatell* did not dock, but we were met by a tug that delivered several packets of mail. There wasn't much to see. Clusters of low, white buildings ran down to the shore, backed by dark green hills.

"It looks so peaceful," Elizabeth said as we leaned on the rail.

"As opposed to what this trip promises to be," I agreed. "We could get off right here and hitch a ride back."

She grimaced. "Uh-uh. We knew it wouldn't be easy. Now, after having met this circus, I'm more determined to see it through. I won't be scared off."

"Okay. But let's try not to get involved in their squabbles. There's going to be plenty of bad blood before this is over with."

Elizabeth nodded. "I just hope that's all it amounts to."

No one else left the ship either. Forty-five minutes later we were underway again, into the long leg of the voyage. I was soon to regret that I hadn't followed my instincts and gotten us off at Halifax.

"DAMNEDEST MESS I'VE EVER SEEN," LESTER FARROW confided to me that afternoon as we took a turn around the upper deck. "Man must be a bit daft to dream up a deal like this. Poor Patience is about to have kittens, between worrying about the inheritance and what everyone thinks of us."

A cold coastal fog swirled around the ship, blotting out the ocean and leaving huge drops of condensation on the metalwork.

"Dundee was reputed to be an eccentric," I said. "But setting his children at each other's throats is a bit extreme. It's particularly rough on the illegitimate ones—having to put up with all the sneers and innuendoes from the others. Maybe his idea was to weed out the weaklings."

"Well, as far as I'm concerned, we're in this to the end," Farrow said. "There's got to be a load of money in his estate, and with Patience's career going downhill—"

He was interrupted by a shrill scream, abruptly cut off, somewhere ahead of us in the fog. We looked at one another and broke into a run.

The fog was blinding. We were nearly to the aft end of the deck before we could see anything. At first I wasn't able to make out what was happening. Then when I was able I couldn't believe my eyes. A big shapeless figure in a black slicker and slouch hat (*The Shadow?* I thought crazily) had Melissa Dundee bent far back over the railing,

large, gloved hands locked around her throat.

Lester Farrow plunged ahead while I stood there with a finger in my ear. He was a small man but obviously not lacking in courage. He leaped full upon the broad back, yelling, "Let go of her, damn you!"

The attacker released Melissa, turned almost casually, and hurled Lester completely across the deck. He fetched up in a heap against the starboard railing. The man's face was masked with a piece of black cloth in which two diamond-shaped eyeholes had been cut.

I saw all this as I was charging forward, intent on catching him while he was distracted. Sure. He swung around to meet me, seized my shoulder and leg and, in one fluid motion, pitched me up onto the railing. I teetered atop it for an instant, long enough to realize a fall could have two possible outcomes: I would go into the ocean or I would dash out my brains on the main deck, thirty feet below. Either one would likely be fatal. Then I went over.

And fell ten feet onto a covered lifeboat. I scabbled around for a handhold and hung on for dear life. A minute later Lester stuck his head over the rail. He saw me and whistled in amazement.

"He's gone now. Scared off, I guess, by the commotion. No further harm done to the young lady or me." He shook his head. "A few feet to the right or left . . . You're a lucky one, chum, indeed you are."

Indeed I was.

DINNER THAT EVENING WAS A TENSE AFFAIR. MELISSA had been unable to recognize her assailant but opined, stridently and often, that it could have been any man at the table. Lester and myself were barred, almost reluctantly, because of our intervention. Captain van der Boss had questioned everyone, including his crew. If he had learned anything he wasn't saying. He did recommend that any of us desiring a turn around the deck do it in pairs.

Which didn't seem likely to be a problem in the immediate future. The weather had turned foul as we headed out from land. A force 6 gale was driving fifteen-foot seas, rolling the *Marcatell* in a most unpleasant manner. I was uncertain just whose dinner I was eating as plates and utensils slid up and down the table. The little steward had spilled soup on Jack Fox's lap and was apologizing profusely. A number of those present had no appetite at all. There were plenty of green faces and hands hovering close to tightly clenched mouths as the courses were served.

"This is a most distressing turn of events," Clive Armes ventured. No one thought he was referring to the weather. "I'm certain Mr. Dundee did not intend for a perhaps understandable dislike to develop

into violence. I can only point out to the misguided person responsible that an inheritance will do him no good at all in prison."

"Prison ain't so tough," Harry Spivo said thoughtfully. "You get out eventually. Anyway, this guy probably figures to do us all in, so there won't be no witnesses."

"Then the process of elimination will eventually identify him," Maurice said drily.

"I still think one of *them* is behind it," Melissa cried, sweeping a pale hand at the usurpers' end of the table.

"Now, now," Millicent Fox said. "Accusations without proof will only make matters worse. We must all be on our guard to insure that the perpetrator has no opportunity to harm us. Captain van der Boss's suggestion that we go outside in pairs should be applied to our other activities as well."

"Amen," Harry Spivo snickered, "Sidra; let's you and me be partners."

She ignored him grandly.

"That's just ducky," Artis Dundee said sourly, "unless you're the one who draws the killer as a companion."

Her remark drew a few nervous chuckles. The main courses arrived—Swiss steak smothered in mushrooms and gravy or baked halibut—apparently served arbitrarily since no one had asked us which we preferred. I got the fish.

I was boning the halibut, sneaking covetous glances at Elizabeth's steak, which looked much more appetizing, when my mind leaped back—back to last week and the trip to the library—

"No!" I yelled, knocking her forkful of food across the table. Everyone looked at me like I'd lost my senses.

"Don't touch the steak, anybody. I did some reading on these kinds of mushrooms not so long ago. I think they're poisonous."

There was a collective gasp. Ralph Dundee, who already had taken a bite, paled and clutched at his throat.

"Take him to the lavatory," I told Artis. "Get him to throw up. Captain?"

"Yah. Yah." Van der Boss looked around uncertainly, as if he were in the midst of a bad dream. "Ve haf no ship's doctor on this run, but my virst mate can deal with emergencies. I get him from the bridge."

NEED I TELL YOU THAT CONFUSION REIGNED OVER THE next few hours? There was plenty to be sorted out. Ralph was shaken but apparently all right. The mushrooms. Were they truly poisonous? That was a problem. Only one person on board admitted to knowing

anything at all about mushrooms—me, and my ignorance was limitless. After the first wave of panic had subsided, people began to question my judgment. I pointed out that there was a simple test. No one volunteered to prove me wrong.

The captain talked to the cook, who denied, protested, threatened, and finally examined the remaining stock of mushrooms. Revelation. Someone had indeed pulled a switch. The question of poison remained unresolved, but those left in storage didn't look anything like the ones served on the steaks. My stock went back up.

Seven of the fifteen people at the table had gotten the steak dinners. Was there a pattern? It certainly looked that way. Those seven were: Ralph, Maurice, and Melissa Dundee; Millicent Fox, Patience O'Dell, Harry Spivo, and Elizabeth. Every one of the Dundee offspring except Sidra Soames. Not a spouse, none of the three lawyers, not the captain. It made a pretty weak case for coincidence.

So where did that leave Sidra? Holding the bag, it appeared. Her coolness broke for an instant and she responded to a particularly sharp question with an angry flash.

"Am I stupid, do you think, that I would kill the seven of you and leave the finger pointing at myself? Idiots! It is a trick, no more!"

"The lady has a point," Clive Armes said judiciously. "Could have been anyone. Even somebody with a poisoned plate, who would have had the perfect excuse for not touching their food. Seasickness, you know."

"Granting that this had to be arranged one way or another," I said, "the key is: who delivered the plates?"

Chins dropped. The steward had generally been so unobtrusive, and everyone at the table so obsessed with their own dreams of impending wealth, that nobody could really remember what he looked like. The captain looked embarrassed. "New man," he muttered and sent people to scour the ship. An hour later he reported they had found no trace of him. One steward, missing. There was something else, however.

"One of my men discovered this tacked up on the menu board," van der Boss said.

It was a list of diners at the captain's table for the evening meal. Alongside each name was the specified main dish, steak or fish. The block printing was exactly like the warning notes of the previous day. The steward could, it appeared, have been duped. But where was he? And who had actually substituted the mushrooms?

"By God! This is outrageous!" Ralph Dundee snarled, sipping at a bottle of Moxie to calm his stomach.

He got no argument there. The entire company remained gathered in-

the dining room, reluctant to return to their staterooms. I was concerned about Elizabeth, uncertain how she would react to the poisoning attempt. I could have saved my worry. She leaped into the breach.

"Instead of sitting around wringing our hands, why aren't we trying to find the person responsible? So far we've been lucky; two near misses. The next attempt could be fatal for one or more of us."

"The trouble with this bunch is, everybody's got a motive," Lester Farrow said. "As well as the opportunity."

Maurice's wife Cheryl managed to titter and look frightened at the same time. I could sympathize with her. The situation was so bizarre as to provoke laughter. At the same time there was a real possibility that someone would be dead before long unless the person behind these attacks was discovered. A lot of wild ideas were spinning through my head, but none of them seemed to mesh.

At last the strain of the incredible day began to take its toll. Uneasily, pair by pair, people began to fade away. I made sure Melissa and Sidra were escorted safely to their cabins. Only Harry Spivo disdained the company of others. He still sat alone at the table, drinking morosely, when we left.

THE STORM INTENSIFIED THROUGH THE NIGHT. I LAY awake late, musing over such cheerful diversities as the *Titanic*, shipboard killers, and death by drowning, rocking sharply to the rhythm of the waves as they surged under the steel hull. Elizabeth slept deeply, an arm thrown across my chest. That had been a trait since the amnesia: when she was awake she was fine but when she slept, she slept like the dead. Right then I envied her.

Sometimes I do my best thinking when I'm not thinking. My brain, shifting in and out of gear like a bad transmission, jumped back to the fortuitous expedition to the library. So much had happened in the intervening week I had forgotten all about the man I suspected was following me . . . Damn! I tried to picture the missing steward again, spilling Jack Fox's soup earlier tonight. They were both small, sharp-featured, balding. Trade the ratty-looking coat for a high-collared white jacket . . . Was it possible?

I sat up suddenly, brushing Elizabeth's arm aside. If it were true, then his presence here opened up a new bucket of worms. Like premeditation. Meaning someone had been on the job, checking the rivals up, before the cruise was even announced. Someone with inside knowledge. And motive?

It was twelve-thirty. I got up, put on slippers, pants and a robe,

shifting from foot to foot to keep my balance. An idea was percolating, a way to get to the bottom of this mess. Who could I trust, who did I know was not a potential killer?

Melissa, surely, although I didn't fancy going up against her paranoid and hysterical foolishness. Ralph Dundee, probably, although the poisoning reaction could have been faked on his part. I went through the roster, finally settling on Lester Farrow. He had saved my bacon yesterday. That was as good a recommendation as I was likely to find.

I tiptoed out the door, locking it carefully behind me. Down the passageway to his and Patience's stateroom where I rapped lightly on the panel. It was opened almost at once by Lester. Another insomniac.

"Come up to the lounge for a minute," I said softly. "I want to ask you a question."

He stared at my face. "You're onto something, aren't you? Be right with you."

We had the place to ourselves. The stink of Harry Spivo's Bull Durham cigarettes hung in the air. I drew two seltzers and we sat at the bar. "Okay, kiddo, let's have it."

"Think back," I said, "before the trip. Anything unusual happen to you or Patience during the couple of weeks prior?"

"No-o-o." He scratched his unshaven chin. "Wait! There was one thing. Somebody broke into our place, oh, a couple of days before that lawyer fellow came around. The weird part was, they didn't take anything. But they sure went through it all. Why?"

"Just like our cabins last night. I was followed. By a guy who was a ringer for our missing steward. When I realized that, it occurred to me a lot of prior planning may have gone into this voyage."

Lester blinked. "You mean this whole she-bang could be a set-up, somebody's scheme to eliminate a few of the heirs?"

"Hard to say. We've had two near misses. The last one could have put the quietus to most of the eligibles. Want to take a little stroll?"

"Where, for Gossakes, at this time of night?"

"Below decks. It's also occurred to me that our knowledge of this ship is rather limited."

I got a flashlight from the standard shipboard behind-the-bar emergency compliment (includes belaying pin) and we set out for parts unknown.

THE BOWELS OF AN OCEAN LINER ARE NOT DISSIMILAR to the inner construction of a hive—passage, compartment, stairwell, each section sealed from the next by watertight doors. We started at the

bow and worked our way back. I wasn't a hundred percent certain what we were looking for—call it one of those hunches that insinuates itself just back of your logic and refuses to let go.

We passed by the galley, which was emitting enticing bakery smells, and the crew quarters with other, less delightful odors. Beyond that we entered the nether regions. From somewhere far below came the thumping vibration of the engines. Although there were various signs of activity we ran into no one.

"Gives me the willies," Lester said as the ship swayed and creaked around us. "I keep thinking about all that water out there, over our heads, just waiting for one little leak to come gushing in."

"I think we're in more danger from our newly acquired inlaws than the ocean," I said. "If they can—oops!"

Someone was coming down the dimly lit corridor ahead of us. Luckily we had just passed through a bulkhead. We dived back inside and I pulled the door nearly closed, leaving only a small crack to peer through.

Gradually the echoing footsteps resolved into two figures moving toward us in the gloom. I was ready to order a further retreat when they turned off into one of the rooms along the corridor.

Lester was grinding on my shoulder. "Hey! Are my eyes shot or—wasn't that—?"

"Yeah. Harry Spivo and Melissa Dundee. Can you think of a more unlikely combination?"

"If it's a lovers' rendezvous, I'll eat my shirt. C'mon."

We catfooted down the passageway, ready to bolt if somebody stuck their head out. No one did. When we reached the door where they had disappeared I could hear voices inside.

A low, harsh monotone. Spivo. The unmistakeable sing-song whine of Melissa. Another male voice that was muffled but seemed vaguely familiar. And then suddenly, shatteringly, the cry of a woman in distress.

Again Lester was half a beat ahead of me. While I stood frozen, trying to imagine what was going on in there, he kicked the door open and rolled in like gangbusters. Slow but steady I was right behind him.

Artis Dundee was the woman who had screamed. Her reason was obvious. The body of her husband Ralph was slumped in a corner of the tiny storage room. Spivo held her by the arm with one meaty paw while Melissa stood by and gaped. The other man in the room came as a total surprise: Clive Armes.

EVERYONE WAS STILL FOR A MOMENT, STALLED BY

shock and indecision. "What the hell's going on here?" Lester demanded. "Armes, what happened to Ralph? Did these two—?"

Clive Armes moved slightly. A small gun appeared in his hand. "Calm down, Mr. Farrow." His accent was still British, no longer so polite. "Step in here, Mr. Bryant. Close the door behind you."

I did, aware that my midnight deductions had contained a serious miscalculation. Perhaps a fatal one. I had assumed that the person behind the threatening series of occurrences was one of the potential Dundee heirs. But Armes, I realized now, was in a better position than anyone to manipulate people and events.

"Very good. Now, all of you move over in the corner with the late Mr. Dundee."

Artis shrieked again, then moaned as Harry Spivo's grip tightened on her arm and propelled her into the corner. We crowded together, careful not to step on Ralph, whose neck was twisted at a grossly unnatural angle.

Melissa Dundee nibbled at a raw knuckle and whispered, "What are we going to do with them?"

"We must arrange for a large scale accident," Armes said. "It's a pity we have to eliminate these people; their absence will bring us no closer to our goal. The price of nosiness, I'm afraid."

"Hold on," I said. "Let me get this straight. You three are in cahoots. With the objective of cutting down on the contenders for old Horace's bucks. But why make it so complicated by arranging this cruise? There must be a dozen easier ways."

Armes smiled thinly. "True enough, Mr. Bryant. Unfortunately, this trip was a legitimate part of Horace Dundee's posthumous instructions. I had no choice but to carry on, in spite of the difficulties it raised. You see, the provisions of the will are very much as I described them. Once I learned this, and of the wasteful distributions of assets he intended, I determined to secure my share. And then some. I had been his counselor for nearly ten years, yet he left me nothing beyond my usual fees. The wealth was going instead to all his offspring, some of which he had never seen. I recruited Mr. Spivo and Miss Dundee after we were underway, to assist in the campaign of terror and represent my interests inside the family. They saw at once that a three-way split was far more preferable than eight."

"But you must have been working on this well ahead. The tails and all . . ." I grabbed Artis as she sagged against me.

He gave me a puzzled frown. "No. This was a last minute decision. And it was not my intention that such violence should result." He waved a hand at Ralph's body. "Frightening the other heirs into not

completing the trip would have been quite satisfactory. Unfortunately my associate became—impatient—with my results. Well, you have your wish, my burly friend. More blood must now be spilled.”

Harry Spivo grunted. “No sense pussyfootin’ around. This will get rid of the rest of ‘em when we get to France, you better believe. Hell, some of ‘em might decide to swim.”

“Let me guess,” Lester Farrow said sourly. “That was you up on deck in the mask this afternoon. A little scheme to draw suspicion away from Melissa as well as really start things rolling. Which one is the mushroom gourmet?”

Melissa said, “Me. They would only have made people sick, not killed them. I think.” She giggled. “I wondered if you two would ever come to my rescue. The look on your face when you went over the railing . . . What *are* we going to do with them?”

“There’s still time to stop this.” I directed my appeal at Clive Armes, not very hopefully. “What happened to Ralph?”

“The poisoning affair enraged him,” the lawyer replied. “He came to my cabin earlier tonight. I believe he planned to use his authority as eldest son to persuade the captain to turn the ship back. He asked me about challenging the will if we returned to New York. I might have talked him out of it, but Harry here chose that time to arrive. He took a more direct approach to the problem.”

“Broke his neck,” Spivo proclaimed. “Never did like the loudmouth.” Artis moaned. “And you shut up, lady, or you’re next. You got a plan, Armes?”

“A lifeboat, I think. We can place them underneath, drop it from the davits. A very nasty, unfortunate incident that will cover up Ralph’s murder and strike terror into the remainder of the party.”

Lester snorted. “What would we all be doing on deck, at night, in this kind of weather?”

Armes smiled, a very small smile. “Plotting, perhaps. Let the speculation run wild. It can only help our cause.”

Spivo nodded. “Let’s move it. Pick up the stiff, you two. Little girl, you see that Dundee’s old lady behaves herself. I’ll go ahead and keep an eye out, just in case.”

WE MADE A GROTESQUE PROCESSION WHEN WE FINALLY got organized. Ralph Dundee’s body was brutally heavy. Lester had the knees, I had the shoulders. He sagged between us like a sack of potatoes. Armes covered us closely while Melissa guided Artis along. Spivo scouted ahead, but it was now approaching two in the morning. The watch changes were over and we ran into no one.

We went up stairwells and down corridors until we reached a door that opened onto the boat deck. Spivo held it and we paraded through. It was foul outside. Wind and rain lashed the deck. The metal floor was treacherous as it canted from side to side. Running lights provided a dim illumination, shining eerily on the wet superstructure.

About thirty feet from the door we stopped. Overhead a twenty-man lifeboat hung from its davits, swaying gently in the storm. I recalled from our drill the small cranes that were used to place it over the water. My teeth were chattering, presumably from the cold and wet. Fear might have been in there somewhere.

"On the deck, everyone." Armes gestured with the gun. "Harry, old man, would you go up and see what's necessary to cut the boat loose?"

Lester and I deposited Ralph Dundee and settled ourselves uncomfortably on the icy plating. Artis clutched at the body and began a low, painful sobbing. Melissa giggled unnervingly. I wondered what Elizabeth would do. She would be certain it was no accident.

"Nothing to it," Spivo's voice floated down. "There's a release gadget on these cables. Just say when."

Armes glanced up, calculating. The boat would fall a good twenty feet. It was heavy. He checked our positioning. We were directly underneath. Lester was cursing softly.

"Come, my dear," Armes said to Melissa and they started to back away. The gun never wavered.

It came to me that, although I was about to die, there was something I could do to foul up his plans. It seemed like all that day and night I had been a step behind, bewildered and hesitant at the rapid flow of events. Now there was at least one thing I could change. I sprang from the deck, straight at the lawyer. Melissa squealed.

Armes shot me in the shoulder.

I grinned at him even as I went down. Searing pain throbbed along my left arm, followed by blessed numbness. I saw the comprehension dawn in his eyes.

"Try and sell—your accident story—now," I grated.

He sneered. "You fool. What does it matter? Either way will serve my purpose and create panic. Harry, drop the boat."

He was probably right. I waited for the big lifeboat to come plummeting down. Odd that twelve hours before one of them had saved my life.

It didn't fall. Instead there was a scraping noise, followed by what sounded, even in the wind and weather, like a grunt of pain. I glanced at Lester. He shrugged.

"Hurry up, dammit!" Armes called. There was no reply.

Then the door we had come through slammed back and two men carrying guns stepped onto the deck. The guns were pointed at the lawyer. One of the men was the little steward I had suspected of tailing me.

"Drop the hardware, mate," he snapped.

Armes gaped at him, plainly confused. "Who are you?"

"Just put down the shooter. Then let's all get inside, out of this weather. Mr. Bryant, are you okay?"

"More or less," I said. I stood up carefully. "I'm not up to hauling the late Mr. Dundee back inside though."

That feat was accomplished by Lester and the steward's partner, a big guy with a livid scar along the left side of his jaw. The little man relieved Armes of his pistol and shepherded him inside. Artis and I struggled along on our own.

We all wound up in the port observation lounge where we were met by Harry Spivo, clutching a bleeding head, escorted by two other men I hadn't seen before. There were a lot of curses, questions, and astonished stares as everyone tried to figure out what was going on. I was as confused as anyone but at the moment it all seemed secondary. I reveled in the warmth and the fact that I was still alive.

ANSWERS CAME SHORTLY. THE INSIDE DOOR WAS opened by one of the newcomers to admit a very old man in a wheelchair. He was jaundiced, drawn-faced, palsied. He looked close to death. His hawk-sharp eyes were still alert, however, and they swept the room, settling on Clive Armes.

"So," he said harshly. "You're the one responsible for this. My trusted advisor. Now you've killed my son."

The lawyer had gone slack-jawed and pale, as if seeing a ghost. "M-m-m-m-mr. Dundee. You're—supposed to be—*dead*."

"Not quite," the old man rattled. "Not yet. Your mistake, Armes. Your last."

"But everyone thought . . ." Melissa's always shrill voice climbed higher, taut as a violin string.

"You all thought what you were supposed to think. That I had died. It was handled well, so well that even the counselor here didn't know. Amazing what money can buy, eh?"

"But why?" This from Artis, her first coherent words of the evening.

Horace Dundee barked a phlegm-choked laugh. "Very simple. To find out if any in my unfortunate band of offspring were worthy of my inheritance. You see, I'm terminal. My liver is completely shot. I was

told I had six weeks to live. That was four months ago. Frankly, I have little but contempt for my legitimate children. I decided to investigate the others, the ones I had given up, see if any of them had inherited a backbone. I wanted to observe all the candidates under pressure. What better way than throwing them all together? I hit on this scheme."

I was staring at the steward—or whatever he was. "Then you *were* following me—only you were working for Mr. Dundee, not Armes."

The old man answered wryly, "That's debatable. I had everyone—and their spouses—checked out. I didn't know Link had been spotted. Then the idiot winds up serving the poisoned food." He shook his head. "You're Elizabeth's husband, right?"

"Yes," I said. The world was pulsating in time to the throbbing in my shoulder. "You did a heck of a job convincing everyone you were dead."

"Damn right I did. Had to, to make it work. Nobody involved with my affairs was in on it. It was a good idea. I just didn't expect this bozo to try grabbing off the loot for himself. As for you two . . ." He glared at Melissa and Harry Spivo.

"Daaaddy," the girl said plaintively. "I didn't know it would turn out like this."

"No kidding. You always were a spoiled little brat. Get these two back to their rooms." He waved at Lester and me. "My doctor will be around to see you in a little while."

I nodded. "What about them?"

He smiled, the cruellest, hardest smile I've ever seen. "I'll take care of these greedy people. In my own way. Now go."

The last thing I saw as we left was the look of utter, hopeless terror on Clive Armes' face.

I DIDN'T GET MUCH REST THE REMAINDER OF THAT night. I had just explained everything to Elizabeth when Horace Dundee's physician dropped by. The bullet hole in my shoulder was surprisingly small and there was very little blood. He cleaned and bandaged the wound, told me it would be stiff for a few days, and went away.

By then the rest of the passengers were aware of what had happened. Lester and I had to tell our story several more times. Captain van der Boss, who necessarily had been in on the deception, explained that the senior Dundee's party occupied a series of aft rooms below decks. Several of his men had served as crewmembers to report on our activities.

There was general outrage at how we had been manipulated.

Tempered by the ever-present hope that the old patriarch's decision might still favor a particular heir. Human greed is amazingly resilient.

Gradually, over the next day or so, it all got sorted out. Horace Dundee refused to meet with anyone. Melissa and Harry Spivo reappeared among us, chastened and sullen. Safe to assume they had been eliminated from the running.

Ralph Dundee was buried at sea. Artis mourned dry-eyed. "That leaves five," Sidra Soames said, only half-joking. Somehow, I assumed, the old man would fix the killing with the authorities. So he could exact his own brand of justice.

Lester Farrow and I got roaring drunk one night.

"What a terrible old man," Elizabeth said as we approached Le Havre. "I hope he leaves it all to charity. No one here deserves the money and it's probably dirty anyway."

I grinned. "That's mighty noble of you. But a little compensation for our troubles would be all right with me."

"I suppose. Anyway, the second part of his will won't be opened until he dies. If it's even any good now. That reminds me. Darling, have you seen—?"

"No, I haven't. Neither has anyone else I've talked to. I wish I could say I cared."

In fact, Clive Armes was never seen again. ●

MYSTERY MINIQUIZ

Author Edward L. Wheeler created what famous outlaw character that appeared in thirty-three dime novels?

Based on a real-life desperado, the outlaw was Deadwood Dick.

What two former TV-Avengers girls appeared in what James Bond film?

Diana Rigg and Joanna Lumley both had roles in On Her Majesty's Secret Service.

What detective agency had as its motto: "We Never Sleep"?

The Pinkerton National Detective Agency.

He had it all planned. He'd attend the wedding and the reception, and then he'd give the bride a wedding gift she'd never forget—his dead body!

When It All Falls Into Place

by JERRY JACOBSON

LILLABETH HAD CALLED HIM ON THE PHONE AND SAID they really ought to meet and discuss it one final time before the wedding. After all, she wanted them to remain on good terms and that couldn't happen if he was going to stay mean and petty and carrying grudges around the rest of his life like a sack of heavy stones.

Why didn't they meet at noon in Heritage Square? It was, after all, quite near the Spinnaker Bay Yacht Club and since she was having lunch with Harmon on his boat, she could simply walk up to the square. They would have a clean, candid discussion about these matters, about the infallible process of natural selection and about goals and dreams and the like. She truly wanted them to be friends because if *they* couldn't be friends, *he* couldn't be extended an invitation to the wedding. And *that* would look very out of place and embarrassing, because everyone was coming.

His first inclination was just to let the whole thing slide. After all, losing a girl to Harmon T. Harmon III was a regular occurrence to the young men of Fall City. He had been doing it ever since grade school. John had been invited to Harmon Harmon's first formal birthday party in the big house on Autumn Hill. A maid and a butler had helped him blow out the ten candles. When they played Pin the Tail on the Donkey, only Harmon had been allowed to peek under his blindfold. Later, they also played Spin the Bottle, but only Harmon got to go in the other room with girls for a kiss, because it was *his* bottle.

It continued that way all through junior high and high school. Favors were extended to Harmon T. Harmon III and withheld from others. But the Harmons had built Fall City from the ground up and now owned most of the ground on which things were built and most of the structures as well, so there wasn't much of a future in objecting to what

accrued to whom and how often and to what degree.

And now, Harmon T. Harmon was about to get the ultimate acquisition. He was about to get the only girl John had ever loved and he didn't see there was a single thing he could do about it, because that was the way of matters in Fall City and the tides were too big to buck. The way he had it figured, he would extend Lillabeth his best wishes for a happy life, go to the wedding and reception and then walk down to the loading dock behind the Harmon Red Ale Brewery, where he worked, and put a bullet behind his right ear. They'd find him dead of suicide on Harmon property. He wasn't sure how much scandal that would create, but the act definitely would lift a few hackles on more than a handful of necks.

JOHN WAS RIGHT ON TIME FOR THEIR MEETING IN Heritage Square. Lillabeth was ten minutes late. She had always been on-the-dot punctual before. Perhaps she was attempting to acquire the knack for it. The rich were always late for everything.

She wore doeskin palazzo pants and a polka dot vest blouse. They looked foreign and very expensive.

"Harmon bought this outfit for me," she told him. "It isn't part of my trousseau, or anything. Just a gift. We drove over to Butler for it. The House of High Fashion. I mean, you can't get a *thing* here in Falls City that's stylish or original."

He told her the outfit did indeed qualify on both those counts. He dug into his brown bag lunch and offered her an egg salad sandwich, or a liver sausage on whole wheat, her choice, but she said she'd had steak burgundy and fresh fruit on Harmon Harmon's boat and was just stuffed.

John searched in his paper sack for a chilled stuffed prawn or two, but pulled out an apple instead.

"Now, John . . ."

She made a face at the apple, so John ate it himself.

". . . I don't want you thinking this little meeting means a parting of the ways. I still want us to be friends. It's just that we can no longer be together in any public setting, or social event."

"Can we be seen walking on the same side of the street?"

"Gee, I suppose that would be all right, John. But not hand-in-hand, or even abreast, or anything like that. And as far as social gatherings are concerned, I think it would be best if you didn't speak to me until I spoke to you first."

John told her he understood such things as social protocol and discretion and not speaking until spoken to first.

"Good," Lillabeth said. "See, John, I'm becoming a Harmon and that means there's a tremendous amount of social pressure not to screw up. Actually, it might be best for you if you just left town altogether."

John felt a stab of pain go through his heart.

"Oh, I don't mean that to be cruel, John. It's just that in a place like Fall City, there's really only three ways to go. Be a Harmon, marry a Harmon, or pack up your socks and leave."

"I thought we had a future together, Lillabeth," he said.

"No, John. What we had together was a good time. And you *don't* have a future here. You work on the loading dock at Harmon Red Ale. In ten years they'll make you a warehouseman and bring you in out of the cold. In twenty years you'll make warehouse foreman. That's if you can beat out your competition and a beer barrel doesn't fall on you and crush your back. That isn't a future, John, that's an epitaph."

"I see. And you have a future, because you're going to marry a Harmon."

"Now you got it, John."

A MINUTE OF ICY SILENCE PASSED BETWEEN THEM. TO John it seemed to have the duration of the entire Ice Age itself.

"You're not wearing your engagement ring," he said finally. She'd had it for about a week now, but it was not on her finger.

"Harmon wanted it back to have more diamonds put in the setting," she told him. "As you may know, his buying me the ring was a very sudden thing. It was the morning after the night we'd spent at the Blue Moon Motel out on Dudley Road."

"And he bought it for you the next day?"

"No," said Lillabeth. "He already had it *with him*. From when he got it back from Cynthia Fortner after they broke up. It was really my *interim* engagement ring, you might say."

"Then he really didn't *buy* you a ring at all."

"Well, no. Not across the counter for cold, hard cash at Poole Brothers Fine Jewelry, or anything like that."

"It's sort of a second-hand ring then you'd say. Because yours is the second hand it's been on."

"All right, all right. *No*, he didn't buy it. And *yes*, it's been on a previous hand. But as Gertrude Stein said, a ring is a ring is a ring . . ."

"I think Gertrude Stein was talking about roses," John said.

"What," said Lillabeth, watching a bird swoop through the square and twirling her thumbs and looking very anxious to be going.

"So when is the engagement announcement going to appear in the

Fall City Bugle?" John wanted to know.

"Well, Harmon says that's all in the timing. But soon. Very, very soon."

"How soon? Like next week? Next month? June?"

"Well, he didn't pinpoint the precise day."

"Did he pinpoint the month or the year?" John asked.

"Oh, Lord. He didn't pinpoint *anything*. A Harmon marriage is a very complicated thing. It takes preparation and planning and . . ."

". . . timing," John said. "Then *nothing's* been done about the engagement, or the wedding, or anything."

"Well, there's my ring," said Lillabeth.

"But isn't it usual and proper to expect the engagement announcement and the giving of the engagement ring to occur at roughly the same time?"

Lillabeth thrust out her lower lip and blew a breath of air upward in exasperation so that it hit a small curl of hair above her forehead and set it in motion. "They *don't* occur at the *same time*, when the ring has to be given back so that more diamonds can be set in it."

"I see. Well, yes, that would seem reasonable."

Lillabeth looked at her wristwatch. "John, I didn't think our little talk was going to take *this long*. All I wanted was your word that you'd be a good sport about this."

"You've got it," John said.

"Fine. Retaliation and poor sportsmanship are not becoming traits. Now, I have a stop to make in town and then I have to get back to the real estate office. And *you* have to get back to the brewery. You'll be getting a wedding invitation, of course. Please show up, John. I mean, it's very poor form to refuse to attend the wedding merely because you're the jilted boyfriend. My gift register is on file at Gullickson's Department Store. *And* at Poole Brothers Fine Jewelry, in case you had in mind silver, or tea services, or decorative gold pieces, or something like that. And pul-eeze try not to get butchered-drunk at the reception, because everyone will be watching to see how you'll behave as the spurned lover. And pul-eeze also do not maul me in the reception line or try to French kiss me. The Harmons will be checking for stuff like that. Boy, if I screw up, I guess you know I'm out the door on my Fanny Hill. And *that means* I'm out of the Harmon wills, too."

"Wills?"

"You betcha, Red Ryder. I mean, there's a damn army of Harmons old enough to kick off at any moment. And look at all those bequeathments! They could all go one right after the other like toppled dominos, which means my name could turn up in *dozens* of them. And

that means cash will come pouring in like water out of busted plumbing."

"No funny business at the wedding or the reception," John told her. "Scout's honor."

She pecked him hurriedly on the cheek then and ran off across Heritage square to meet her destiny, leaving John alone to consider his own. He had exactly seven minutes left on his lunch hour and it was easily a ten-minute sprint back to the Harmon Red Ale Brewery if he caught all the traffic lights and took all the right shortcuts and alleys. He would never make it.

IN THE BACK OF FAIN'S SPORTING GOOD, TWENTY-TWO-year-old Hunk Grant carefully positioned the undrilled, 16-pound bowling ball in the laminated wood cradle and then began measuring distances from the statistical section of an order form. This one would be a full-span fingertip grip for a beginning bowler, with a 9° inward pitch on the thumbhole. Grant didn't know the man who had bought the ball, scarcely spoke a word to him when he took the customer's measurements; but he knew he was an egomaniacal blockhead who probably also had purchased an \$800 set of Hogan golf clubs without ever having swung a single stroke in his life, had rudely discovered the game to be more difficult than it appeared and had likely long ago tossed the whole set into a lake or snapped them in half one-by-one, over his knee. A full fingertip, with a reverse pitch! The jerk would have that ball all over the bowling center concourse and kill or maim someone before it ever found a pin! Why did they all think they were Earl Anthony, the first crack out of the box? Why did they insist on having the \$60 calfskin shoes and the top-of-the-line bag with more compartments than a spy's attache case?

Hunk Grant centerpunched the drill holes and glanced out the open door to the sales floor. Tod Markey would get an \$18 commission on this one sale alone. Markey was a zippity-pippity graduate from the junior college and he'd waltzed in the door three months earlier with his Associate Business Degree in Management and Sales and had proceeded to bamboozle old man Fain into giving him a sales job. Markey was handsome and muscled and had all that blond hair going for him and he had a line of bull longer than the Chesapeake and Ohio railroad. He convinced old man Fain to get rid of any merchandise that wasn't top-of-the-line and then to stand back and he'd do the rest. Now, every female over the age of ten in Fall City owned a \$150 custom-balanced, steel-frame tennis racket and the accessories that went with it and a multicolored, custom-drilled ball like the one Grant was

preparing to drill now, plus the chi-chi bag and shoes. He was a top-of-the-line jerk, as far as Hunk Grant was concerned. But a top-of-the-line jerk with a future.

Grant's future, on the other hand, was murky to say the least. He'd made it out of Fall City High by the skin of his teeth and had washed out of a New York Mets baseball try-out camp. The *Mets!* That was like being turned down for admission to a fine arts college by an admissions board made up of ten monkeys dressed up in artist smocks.

He'd been hired by old man Fain after his picture had appeared in the *Bugle* as a professional baseball hopeful. Grant had been an all-state second team infielder and hence a minor local celebrity. Fain put him on the sales floor in a suit and tie and had featured him in a full-page ad in the *Bugle*. But Grant had no end of trouble writing up sales slips and figuring discounts and volume orders and the computerized cash registers had given him cold fits.

Finally, old man Fain had to put him in the back room to string tennis rackets and drill and balance bowling balls at \$160-a-week. Now, he was just another failed town jock trying to limp through life without making too many mistakes, while young turks like Tod Markey went up through the ranks like a rocket shooting into the heavens at Cape Canaveral.

Angrily, Hunk Grant muscled the cumbersome bowling ball into position in the rickety wood cradle in preparation to sink the first of three drillholes. He'd asked old man Fain for a new steel cradle, but Fain said he would have to make-do with what he had. In a few months, work would begin on the new 40-lane Fall City Lanes and that meant a pro shop as well, so Fain's days were numbered in the ball-drilling business.

Make-do. That was the saga of his sad life. Hunk Grant swore beneath his breath and negotiated the drill press over the bowling ball, as the wooden cradle holding it gave out another creak.

NEXT DOOR TO FAIN'S SPORTING GOODS, CHESTER Burgess, who owned a garden and plant shop called Plantasia, had just rung up a sale of six potted herb bushes to an apartment horticulturist female: two bush basil, two of chervil and one each of sweet marjoram and chives. He instructed the young woman that the plants would need sunny spots to flourish, but no so much sun that they scorched and needed a water mist spray every two minutes merely to survive. He further explained a bit about perennial herbs to her, although he found it extremely difficult to keep constant eye contact with the pretty young girl. He had always been painfully shy around women, which partially

explained why he was the oldest bachelor-proprietor of the stores and shops along Harmon Avenue. He was thirty-one now, which meant he was likely a touch past being considered good marriage material by most of the young, single women in town. In all those years, not once had he ever whistled at a woman, or patted one playfully on the rear, or described one to another man by making an hourglass gesture with his hands. He knew his shyness was a barrier between himself and women and yet he was helpless about making any real attempts to break down that barrier of estrangement.

His shop was empty of customers now. He made his way in a pudgy waddle to the front door, locked it and flipped over a cardboard placard which read "CLOSED FOR LUNCH—OPEN 1 P.M." He went back through the plant-cluttered shop, a dense, green cave of ivy and ferns and climbing philodendrons and tangles of tropical plants, his humid, close security blanket, this miniature Amazon jungle where he felt invulnerable.

He pushed through the swinging service door at the rear where he made up his gift bouquets and planters and bulk orders for deliveries and did his advertisements mailings and billings. This world was even safer still, a refuge within a refuge. Nothing and no one could intrude here, nothing that could threaten his existence or his manhood.

There was only Bobo.

BURGESS HEARD BOBO NOW AS HE ROUSED HIMSELF FROM sleep in his wire-mesh pen. The dog's back arched in a tentative threat. But then, recognizing it was only his master who had come into the back room, Bobo flopped back on his stomach, closed his eyes and went promptly back to sleep.

Bobo was Chester Burgess' third pit bull terrier. His first two, Rowser and Scrap Iron, had died noble deaths in the pit ring. Both had been fierce and courageous fighters, but injuries made them grow fearful and tentative and Burgess had to withhold them from big-money matches, like human boxers grown old or infirmed and reduced to the indignity of club fights and sleezy smokers. But they had died nobly and had not cowered in corners or fled the ring altogether, but had stood what little ground was left to them, stood it to the bitter, bloody end.

Bobo was from a litter sired by a former county champion. Burgess had paid \$500 for him, a top price for a pup with proven lineage. He was undefeated in six matches and had already earned Burgess three times his cost in prize money. Tonight, he would be taking Bobo sixty miles upstate to a small coke mining town called Black Diamond for a

match with another unbeaten pit bull named Alley Brat, who had mortally wounded all but one of the terriers against whom he'd been matched. Tonight, one of them would die. Burgess could feel it gnawing at his bones. Bobo or Alley Brat; one of them would walk away and one of them would be chewed to death in a ferocious ending, because Bobo was not a quitter or a runner and from what Burgess had heard, neither was Alley Brat.

There would be a big crowd in Black Diamond tonight. Men and boys would stream there from miles around and the ring arena would be packed six deep, with the smells of cigar smoke and whiskey and sweat and death all so thick you could walk right on up to it and slice it open with a knife. Burgess didn't think the match would last long after the initial siccing, because he'd trained Bobo to charge and kill in a frenzy and not to wait on the first attack by an opponent. Some terriers could be trained as strategists and counter-attackers, but Bobo did not possess natural quickness or guile. If a pit bull lacked speed or savvy, its owner had no choice but to train it to be relentless and brutal.

And Bobo was all of that and more.

Burgess would keep his shop open late tonight and leave for Black Diamond after dark, at eight o'clock, when Fall City's six police patrol officers changed shifts. In Butler County, it was against the law to fight pit bulls and the County Animal Control Division knew of the existence of a four-county network of underground breeders and matchmakers. One raid had already been successful, with dozens of arrests made and six pit bulls seized and destroyed. But it was just that very excitement and danger of doing something illegal and bloodthirsty that kept Burgess' interest in it at a fever pitch. It was carnal and it was sadistic, but he loved every minute of it. And when the fight in the ring was at its most vicious and frenzied, Burgess' insides would convulse and heave in a sort of sensual agony he could not describe. Sometimes, he thought these deep, dark, ecstatic feelings might be very akin to what it would be like making love to a woman; but it shamed him a bit to have to admit to himself that up to now in his life, such a comparison could not be made.

Now, while Bobo continued to sleep, Chester Burgess moved quietly to the rear door of his shop and set it ajar to clear the room of stale air. A delivery truck came down the service alley and for a moment Burgess thought it might be the delivery of his order of evergreen shrubs. But it continued on by and out the opposite end.

Bobo would get all the fresh air and water he wanted today, but he would not be fed. Burgess wanted him filled only with an empty hunger, so that his first whiff of blood and raw flesh in the pit ring

would send him into a starved frenzy. Burgess knew the way and the truth and the light and the glory. Forced starvation made true killers. And true killers made winners.

The hasp was still loose on the door of Bobo's cage, but it would hold fast for now. But he had a long, bumpy ride over backroads to Black Diamond, so Burgess made a mental note to give the hasp screws a few turns before he loaded the cage into the back of his van. But all of that business could wait until dark.

He walked over to his workbench, opened a can of tomato-rice soup and set it on a hotplate to boil. When he opened the can of tuna fish and unleashed its aroma into the air, he heard Bobo stir behind him. Then, the dog recognized that the food was beyond the constrictions of his cage and fell immediately back to sleep.

IN BRIGHT SUNSHINE, LILLABETH PARKER CROSSED Harmon Avenue at a spritely pace. As she passed the Harmon Savings and Loan Bank on the corner, she glanced in the front window, hoping to see her fiance sitting at his desk putting together a loan package or foreclosing on some poor sap's property. She wanted to wave at him and flutter her eyebrows and wrap him one more good turn around her little finger, but she couldn't see a thing of him. Likely he was still out. Harmons took long lunches and endured short work days and generally thumbed their noses at convention and propriety. Soon, she herself would be a Harmon and then she would begin to enjoy all those languid days and gay nights and long mornings in bed.

She continued on past the bank and then Fain's Sporting Goods. Tod Markey gave her a wave and a leer that could have melted steel. Markey thought he was such hot stuff and definitely the Second Coming of Troy Donahue and in high school hadn't given her so much as the time of day. But now that she was on the verge of becoming a Harmon, he was giving it to her in minutes, seconds, and milliseconds. Well, his clock had just been cleaned and hung up on the wall! He would be mired up to his neck in his tennis rackets and jock straps and ping-pong paddles for the rest of his life and she was about to become a Harmon. From here on out, it would be very interesting for both of them seeing just who would be getting the time of day and who would be getting his Bulova cleaned.

Chester Burgess' plant shop was closed for the lunch hour. An odd, cold feeling began to grow on her spine. Burgess was an unusual sort of duck and Lillabeth had always felt just the slightest bit uncomfortable in his presence. It was more than his shyness around women; he seemed almost to be of another planet, an astral visitor whose alien presence

here had not yet been detected by any earthly mortal. He was, in fact, a creep.

She hurried past his shop; not even giving it a side-long glance, though she could feel her eyeballs wanting to slide fearfully in that direction. She went past the King Coin-op Laundramat, Maybelle's Kitchen 'N Things, and The Bell, Book and Candle Bookstore, her gaze fixed firmly on Poole Brothers Fine Jewelry, the last shop on the block.

She saw no alternative to her curiosity about her engagement ring except to check on it herself, to see how many diamonds Harmon T. Harmon III had added to it. She didn't think he would have gone all the way to Butler just to add a few silly diamonds, when the Poole Brothers did such excellent work when it came to redesigning settings. They had once designed a diamond brooch for Tuesday Weld, the actress.

The instant she entered the jewelry store, a sense of forboding made its presence known. It was nothing Lillabeth could lay a finger on; she was not the kind of person easily given over to fits of hysteria or paranoia. But she felt it, unseen and as yet unidentified, like some deadly gas adrift on the air.

In one of the open customer fitting booths at the rear of the store, a man and woman sat with their backs to the front door, while one of the Poole brothers (she had never been able to tell them apart) sat facing them. She could be mistaken, but something in the cut of their hair, or just a hint of their facial features tol'd Lillabeth she knew both the man and the woman.

In another minute, of course, she had both their identities pinpointed. She recoiled in revulsion and disgust. And then *uncoiled* in indignance and rage and took off in a flat-out charge down the store's main aisle, screaming as she ran, "Harmon, you two-timing tramp-hustler! You ring-giver twerp! You side-street bastard! You . . ."

JOHN COLLIER RETURNED TO THE BREWERY FULLY INTENDING to finish off the last half of his work shift. But the place was such a stifling, boring workhouse, almost like a Communist collective or a federal prison, and he'd just lost his girl to a Harmon and that alone seemed the final indignity he could not take.

Even as he muscled beer kegs into the rear of a Harmon's Red Ale delivery truck, a plan was formulating in his brain. It was impetuous and risky. It might rank him with some of the most celebrated hunted criminals of all time—with Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov and Victor Hugo's Jean Valjean and Dreiser's poor, tragedy-struck Clyde Griffiths in *An American Tragedy*, the one who'd taken his pregnant,

unloved girlfriend Roberta out in a rowboat on that lonely, mountain lake and had rowed back alone. Yes, it was impetuous and it might have him up there with all those famous fugitives. But it also just might work.

Grunksy, the loading dock foreman, frowned with skepticism when John told him he hadn't been feeling well all week. It was flu or something. He was going to take the rest of the day off, preferring not to keel over and die on old man Harmon's loading platform, but in his own bed at home.

The foreman's eyes narrowed to intimidating slits, as if to say he knew a scam when he heard one. "Okay, Collier, take off. But I want something on paper from a doctor, or the time gets docked from your pay and a reprimand goes into your file."

"Thanks, Grunsky. You're all heart."

"I'm all bastard, Collier, and don't ever forget it. And if you weren't one of my best keg-haulers, I'd come down on you like an old building right now. So, if you don't get that physician's verification in the morning, bricks are gonna start falling on you."

No one had ever won a shouting match with Grunsky that John Collier could recall, so he wasn't going to be another notch on his wall. He simply took the stairs down off the loading dock, walked across the gravel bay to the parking lot, got into his ten-year-old Volvo and drove out the rear gate without a wave goodbye to anyone or a backward glance. Such were the ways of tender partings.

HE DROVE INTO TOWN, SWUNG ONTO HARMON AVENUE and passed the Harmon Savings and Loan Bank, now quieted of business with the passing of the noon hour. There was nothing like a little unhurried reconnoitering of a fine summer day.

Of course, were he to hit the jackpot, all hell would break loose. Police cruisers would be thicker than letters in alphabet soup. The Fall City Traffic Engineering Department would turn all the traffic lights to red and leave them there and sirens would go off at the fire station. What Collier would be getting would be what you'd get if somebody hollered fire in a theater full of pandas. Pandemonium. He wasn't entirely sure he could escape from a bank robbery under conditions like that.

If cool heads prevailed after it happened, logic would have them assuming the robber had parked in the customer lot behind the bank, because the quickest route of flight was three blocks east to the interstate freeway. Only a fool or someone with a psychological need to be caught and punished would flee in any other direction.

John circled the block for another pass of the bank. He came up on the service alley that ran behind the shops fronting on Harmon Avenue. An escape plan began to form in his mind. If there was little doubt the pursuit would be flowing in the opposite direction, then moving against the flow and out of town by way of one of the county roads might just outfox the foxes and give him the precious lead-time he needed.

Forsaking the bank's customer parking lot, he would instead leave his car at the service alley's opposite end on Dorfmann Street. Then, he would double back to the bank on foot, rob it neatly, and then sprint back down the service alley to the getaway car.

Of the bank's employees themselves, Collier thought they were more or less a cowardly group. The two female tellers were birdy, fidgety women hired by some Harmon in the town's dim past. They would remain behind their teller windows, very likely in the throes of cold faints. Hector Margolies, the bank's manager, was a milktoast of the highest order, and old Sam Viola, the octogenarian security guard wasn't even allowed to have bullets in his pistol. No, after the robbery, one of them would crawl to a telephone and call the sheriff's office; but beyond that act, courage would be taking the rest of the day off.

John drove four blocks west on Harmon Avenue to Towhy's variety Store and purchased a Lone Ranger mask for eighty-nine cents. The young, female clerk was a stranger to him. She gave him a sly wink and asked whether he wanted it wrapped or would he wear it here? He smiled and told her it was for a nephew's Halloween costume. That he was buying it four months before Halloween caused the girl to give him a strange stare, until John told her it wasn't his habit to wait until the last minute to do things.

He returned east to Dorfmann Street. He parked beneath the shade of a giant elm. Nothing stirred on this quiet residential boulevard, only the birds in the trees overhead.

He got out of his car, leaving the door unlocked. He didn't want to waste valuable time fumbling with a key in a door lock. His successful escape could turn on such slender short-cuts as these.

It was then that he thought about the telltale bank bag. Lugging that around in public view would be like painting ROBBER across his forehead. Then he remembered the brown lunch sack folded neatly in his hip pocket (he saved them up so that he could eke out two weeks' of lunches out of each sack). He would simply transfer the money to the lunch sack and discard the bank bag in the Dewey Dumpster behind Fain's Sporting Goods.

Self-assurance made his step confident and spritely as he turned into Harmon Avenue and passed the jewelry store, the plant shop, the

Harmon Building, and the sporting goods store. His plan was falling into place. Robbery was the best way to get back at a Harmon. They did so love their money above all else.

He reached the entrance to the bank and saw there wasn't a single customer inside. It was all breaking his way. He stepped behind a thick, concrete pillar and deftly put on his mask. He reminded himself not to become too greedy. Most robbers were foiled because they tarried too long with their hand in the till. He would avoid making that mistake. He would take only enough to give him the financial strength to climb from the wreckage of his dead-end life in this town and make a fresh start.

He turned his back on the sun, took a deep breath for courage and then plunged into the bank. And because his back was turned, John Collier did not see the large, dark cloud adrift on a stout wind, adrift and running in such a direction that it would pass across the sun's face and for a few brief seconds blot out its light.

THE HARMON SAVINGS AND LOAN BANK WAS AN OLD world bank in a small country town and those traits made it resistant to change and technology. A fancy-dressed salesman of electronic security equipment had once stepped from the train several years earlier. Loaded down with sample suitcases and fat brochures, he'd made his pitch to the Harmons on the virtues of such devices as silent alarm systems and surveillance cameras and complicated vault locks. But in the end, he was seen standing alone on the dusty railway platform, his stomach uneasy from too many chicken-fried steaks and his order book as mint-new as a shiny dime.

And so, when a stunned and terrified Mrs. Havershaw hit her floor alarm button with her fist from a prone position behind her teller's cage, bells and buzzers erupted in a riot of ear-splitting noise. Mrs. Benoit in the cage next to her, was passed out cold on the floor. Hector Margolies, the manager had crawled under his desk and was nowhere to be seen. And craggy old Sam Violla, the bank guard, was fumbling with his pistol as he tried to insert the single bullet cartridge he was allowed to keep on his person. There was no one at all resembling a functioning human being except Mrs. Havershaw, so she snaked a timid hand up to her counter, pulled her telephone down on top of her, dialed the sheriff's office and called in the robbery.

She described the robber to Sheriff Whalen as best she could, given the extraordinarily traumatic circumstances. He was young, tall and a little bony around the edges. But his raw youth had not made him a bungler. He had entered the bank swiftly, had ordered both herself and

Alice Benoit to fill only a single bank bag with currency of high denominations, and had then sprinted past Sam Viola and out the bank's rear exit. Over his eyes, she further testified, he had worn what looked to have been a black Lone Ranger's mask. He had displayed no weapon and he had not assaulted anyone and he had made no threats or threatening gestures. She thought his voice was one she should recognize, but for the moment she couldn't place it. It could have been one of the town boys, she added, because his mask was really stupid and not too many of the young boys in Fall City were all that bright.

Sheriff Whalen listened patiently and then asked Mrs. Havershaw if there was anything she wanted to add to her report. She told him no, that was about all she remembered. She would hang up now, so he could get his deputies hot on the robber's trail. Besides, she felt she should try to revive Alice Benoit and help Sam Viola look for his bullet. He'd dropped it on the floor while trying to load it into his pistol and she thought she saw it roll under a candy machine near the bank's rear door.

FALL CITY SHERIFF'S DEPUTY RICO MOORE WAS JUST putting the finishing touches to a double-meat cheeseburger at Rayell's Triple-X Drive-in Burgers when Sheriff Whalen issued the 211 call over the radio. Robbery in progress. Harmon Savings and Loan Bank. White male, about twenty-five years, average height and weight, wearing a black Lone Ranger mask, no weapon displayed, but approach with caution.

Whalen's voice then began deploying his patrol deputies left and right and Rico Moore turned up the volume on his radio so he would make no mistakes about his own instructions.

" . . . Deputy Enochs, deploy Interstate Freeway south to Butler . . . Deputy Podgourny, deploy Interstate Freeway north to Cathlamet . . . Deputy Moore, deploy to Harmon Savings and Loan Bank to secure crime scene and take witness statements . . . "

Mop-up work. Rico Moore slammed a palm against the cruiser's steering whell in disgust. Ever since he'd buried a cruiser car three feet in mud out at Myer's Bog two years earlier, Sheriff Whalen hadn't let him get within a hundred miles of any pursuit duty. His pay was being docked to the tune of twenty dollars a week to pay for the cruiser's repairs, but apparently that didn't wipe the slate any cleaner as far as any highway pursuit was concerned. One thing he'd come to learn about that bastard Whalen: he could carry a grudge longer than a desert camel could carry a thirst.

Moore was patrolling only six blocks from the bank anyway, so it

was no additional skin off his nose. He slammed the cruiser into gear, shot down Reliant Avenue and hung a right onto Sharman Street, which was one block east of Dorfmann. He was figuring to park in the bank's customer lot next to the service alley, barricade the alley entrances, take a few preliminary statements from the bank's employees, if he found any of them conscious and coherent, and then hit it back out on patrol. If he kept his ear peeled to his tac frequencies, some pursuit just might develop and he could shoehorn himself into it without Whalen's knowing.

That was his plan, but plans go awry. When he turned off Sharman Street and into the service alley behind the bank, he saw what he could only describe as chaos, pure public chaos. Down the service alley was a sea of humanity, some sprawled on pavement, others merely standing about or in the process of getting to their feet. In the farthest knot, two women and a man appeared to be duking it out, fists and obscenities flailing into the air. In the foreground, Moore could identify Mr. Fain from the sporting goods store, and the kid who worked for him in the back stringing tennis rackets. He also thought he recognized Chester Burgess from the plant shop. And dammit all to hell, there was even a bowling ball, a thick-shouldered dog that looked like a pit bull terrier, and banknotes blanketing the alley like confetti after a parade.

Lying in the midst of all this chaos and writhing on the ground in pain, was a thin young man who looked to Rico Moore vaguely like one of the workers at the Harmon Red Ale Brewery. Dangling from his neck was what looked like a black mask of the type sold in novelty shops. He held a firm grip on his right ankle and was screaming that it was broken. The pit bull terrier was tearing a brown paper bag to shreds, while he intermittently clamped down on the young man's right forearm. Patrolman Moore thought he could smell the aroma of egg salad and liver sausage. Before getting from his patrol unit, he snatched the radio mike from its post and issued a 311 call that, decoded, bespoke that an officer needed assistance.

SHERIFF HARLEY WHALEN WASN'T A BETTING MAN, BUT if gambling had been his nature, he'd have bet a bundle that the next Officer Needs Assistance Call would have come from Rico Moore. He'd already put one patrol car in Myer's Bog and a second up the wrong end of the Big Elephant Car Wash. If there was a job of police work done easiest by one man, Moore could turn it into a six-man job in mere minutes. And here he was again, asking for assistance in the service alley behind Harmon Avenue in the very block where a bank had just been heisted. And with all of Whalen's patrol units dispersed

six ways from next Wednesday!

And worse, Moore hadn't even stayed on the air long enough to give the sheriff even the slimmest idea what was so confounded out-of-hand or complicated that he needed assistance. All he blurted over the radio was, "Gotta go process the scene, now," and then the radio unit went silent. *Gotta go process the scene, now.* Hell, that phrase wasn't even in the operations manual, so where did he pick up all the fancy-schmancy, big-city cop jargon all of a sudden—a dime and a cereal boxtop to Battle Creek, Michigan?

Well, at least Moore was out of true harm's way and Whalen had his other patrol deputies well-deployed against a robber's flight. He might as well take a little run downtown and see what in tarnation was so all-fire urgent about a patrol officer getting his necktie caught in the day-night bank transaction machine.

For Sheriff Whalen, driving into the mouth of that service alley behind the Harmon Savings and Loan Bank was quite a lot like thinking you had found the serene eye of a hurricane only to find you had flown directly into the core of another hurricane. People, dogs, bowling balls, shop proprietors and money swirling everywhere. It looked like the remake of a Three Stooges movie.

"Moore, what in hell is going on here! Who *are* all these people?"

Moore said he thought he could sort it all out if the sheriff had a minute.

"For you, Moore, all day."

"You want my arrests in descending order? You know, felonies first and so on? Or just chronologically?"

"Whatever, Moore."

DEPUTY MOORE NODDED. FIRST, HE INDICATED THE young man handcuffed to an aluminum lighting standard next to the rear door of the Plantasia plant store. He was under arrest for bank robbery and felony flight. His name was John Collier and he had formerly been employed as a keg hauler at the Harmon Red Ale Brewery. Collier, in turn, was suing Fain's Sporting Goods for physical damages incurred when a bowling ball fell from a faulty ball-drilling cradle, rolled out into the service alley and broke his ankle. He was also bringing suit against Chester Burgess, whose pit bull terrier had broken from his cage at the rear of Burgess' shop, charged out an unsecured rear door and dealt Collier severe bite marks and lacerations on his hands, arms and shoulders.

Burgess was being cited for keeping an illegal fighting dog within the county limits and for animal mistreatment, because it appeared the pit

bull was being starved in preparation for a match, inasmuch as it first devoured Collier's lunch sack filled with the bank loot and the odors of egg salad and liver sausage.

As for the three people seated inside Moore's nearby patrol unit, the one in the front seat was Lillabeth Parker. She was being arrested for assault and battery at the request of the two complainants in the rear seat, separated from Ms. Parker by security mesh. They were, from left to right, Harmon T. Harmon III and Pandora Boxx. Ms. Parker had chased them from Poole Brothers Fine Jewelry and out its rear door, striking them repeatedly with an oversized handbag. All three had then collided with Collier as he tried to limp off down the service alley with the pit bull terrier clamped to his forearm. He was likewise suing the threesome for simple assault.

Patrolman Moore also felt he had a strong case against Harmon T. Harmon for the solicitation of a known prostitute, because he had just completed a transaction at Poole Brothers Fine Jewelry for a diamond ring, which he had slipped onto a finger of Ms. Boxx's hand as Ms. Parker was entering the jewelry store. Further, Ms. Boxx was amenable to a lightened sentence for prostitution in exchange for witness testimony against Harmon on such matters as dates, places and the amounts of money and gifts exchanged for sexual favors.

Sheriff Whalen had to grin at the last, as he watched Harmon T. Harmon III try to shrink lower and lower in the rear seat of Moore's patrol unit. He'd always wanted to nab a Harmon—*any* Harmon—at something criminally heinous or embarrassing. And they would be getting Pandora Boxx off the streets of Fall City for a while, as well.

He commended Patrolman Moore on a fine job of police work and instructed him to transport his three arrestees to the Fall City Public Safety Building, have them fingerprinted and locked up and then begin work on the charge sheets. He would bring in John Collier, the principal arrestee, and then make arrangements for Chester Burgess' pit bull terrier to be taken to the Fall City Animal Shelter.

"Nice processing of the scene, Moore," said the sheriff, now taking to the phrase a little for its official crispness and procedural elan.

"Well, it all just sorta fell into place, sir."

Sheriff Whalen let a grin noticeably turn the corners of his mouth. Judging from the human and animal debris he'd first encountered driving up on the service alley, he wasn't about to quibble over that turn of phrase one bit.

I heard soft footsteps behind me, and then my head exploded like a fragmentation grenade, raining tiny slivers of pain through my skull. I lost consciousness and rolled forward into an agonizing dream!

Every Dog Has His Day

by MEL WASHBURN

I NEVER LIKED H.R. HOWARD, THOUGH I'D DONE A LOT OF work for him over the years: I didn't like his looks, his manners, or most of all his business methods. He owned or controlled most of the trucking and transport industry in this part of the state. He was rich as Croesus and very influential in county politics.

And he was hard as nails. In all the security operations I'd conducted for him, I'd never once known him to give a cheating employee or a careless manager an even break. No matter the guy had a family to feed—if he was guilty of the slightest larceny, cut his throat. No matter if another guy had had the best intentions and the highest devotion to H.R. Howard Enterprises—if he'd been careless, slice him up and feed him to the dogs. That was old man Howard's method.

Which I certainly didn't approve of, and yet I accepted every case he offered me because crime is a crime, it has to be stopped, and because the work, though risky (truckers and dock hands will not be gentle in their remonstrances if they catch you snooping), was nevertheless challenging.

But I'd never liked H.R. Howard or encouraged him to think I did. So I was a little surprised when he called me one evening and asked me to come out to his house. "Is this a personal invitation?" I asked him. "Or is it business?"

"A little of both."

He wasn't usually so evasive. "Well, I don't do divorce work or anything like that, you know," I told him. "I'm strictly industrial." No way am I sneaking around motel windows with a camera and tape recorder. I've got my pride.

"This isn't a divorce," he said, "believe me. It's strictly business, but it's my private business, if you know what I mean."

"Sure I do," I said, though I didn't. "I'll be there in twenty minutes." I figured I should at least hear what he had to say, if only as a courtesy to a steady client. So I put on a clean shirt and drove out to his place on Skyline Drive.

IT WAS WHAT THE REAL-ESTATE BROCHURES LIKE TO CALL "a rambling brick colonial mansion," surrounded by miles of wrought iron fencing and acres of lawn. To the untrained eye it probably seemed very remote and secure, but I couldn't help thinking how vulnerable its isolation and openness made it to all sorts of criminal invasions and depredations.

Mr. Howard himself met me at the door, looking the perfect image of the millionaire at home, with his casual clothes, trim-cut grey hair, and erect bearing. He led me down a long, richly-panelled hallway to a sort of den, furnished with heavy bookshelves, a small liquor cabinet, and several easy chairs. There were three other people already in the room. "Want a drink or something?" the old man asked me with the sort of forced hospitality that makes you wish you'd brought your own bottle along. He might give the outward appearance of a millionaire at leisure, but inwardly he was all miser—withdrawn, suspicious, tight-fisted—the same man at home as at the office.

"No thanks," I said.

"All right. Down to business." He introduced me to the other people, though he needn't have bothered. Two of them I knew from their photos in the newspapers. The tall, splendid woman with the silver hair, richly-tanned skin, and warm, sympathetic eyes was Mrs. Howard. You could tell from the way he looked at her that she was the light of the old man's life. It was she, I guessed, who picked out his clothes for him, furnished his home with comforts, and generally saved him from becoming a dried-up old spider at the center of his financial web. And the forty-year-old adolescent in tennis whites, his auburn hair carefully set, his arms well-muscled, his soft hands gently stroking a small dog in his lap, was Mrs. Howard's son by a former marriage, Clayton Lavelle.

These two I knew from the newspapers; the third person I knew from

real life. A pudgy, red-faced man with an unlit cigar stuck in his mouth and a worn leather blackjack half concealed in his hip pocket, he was Detective Harry Brown. "How ya doing, sport?" he asked as we shook hands.

"Okay, Harry."

Harry was a detective with the city police and quite a well-known figure, locally, having run for sheriff in two or three elections (and come close to winning once). He had picked up the nickname "Honest Harry" about eighteen years ago, while still a rookie cop, when almost the entire midnight watch (in those days about a dozen patrolmen) was caught stealing housepaint, lumber, nails, and whatnot out of the very businesses they were supposed to be protecting. It was learned that they were in cahoots with some building contractors down in South Falls, across the state line, which brought in the FBI, and altogether the case was quite a notorious affair. Harry Brown was about the only cop on the watch not involved (too dumb to steal, somebody said), so he cooperated with the investigation, and when the dust had settled he emerged with some sergeant's stripes and the nickname "Honest" Harry Brown.

And though I had heard rumors at the time that Harry had actually been in as deep as the other cops but was smart enough to play dumb and come out smelling like a rose, I never saw anything to make me believe it. Just gossip.

But all this is ancient history. Since that affair, Harry's path and mine had crossed several times in the way of our professions, and I had always found him to be honest enough, but slightly incompetent. More a politician than a police officer, was my impression, maintaining his reputation as an honest man, but doing very little serious damage to the criminal element in the city.

All in all, he was just the sort of person I would expect to meet in H.R. Howard's outer office, which was always crowded with political types and hangers-on, but never at the Howard mansion.

"What's the problem?" I asked the old man.

IT WAS A RANSOM DEMAND. ONE OF THEIR PET DOGS, THE twin to the one Clayton Lavelle was holding, had been stolen from the house. "The thing's worth ten thousand dollars, if you can believe that," the old man said bitterly.

The son by a former marriage turned his face to the wall and sobbed, while the little dog jumped out of his lap, ran over to old man Howard, and began barking and snapping viciously at his heels. "Quiet, Astarte, that's a good doggie," said the wife soothingly, then she went to

comfort her son.

The dog retreated to a corner and sat growling softly at the old man. He in turn glowered at the dog. Normally I myself am fond of small, furry things, but even I felt the urge, after a couple of minutes, to practice some violence on the animal. And H.R. Howard was staring daggers through its well-groomed hide. "Ten thousand dollars," he repeated wretchedly. "Ten thousand dollars." His miserly soul was in torment, you could tell. "If I had my way . . ."

And then the stepson, hearing this, jumped up from his chair and stormed toward the old man. "If you had your way!" He laughed wildly. "Your way! With my dogs! With my life!"

And then the storm broke. The two men shouted bitter words at each other. They argued and bickered and cursed. It was almost embarrassing to watch, even for me, who (because of my profession) relish these little moments when people's emotions rise, their defenses drop, and they reveal the truth about themselves.

Which in this case was that stepfather and stepson would each gladly have strangled the other—provided they could do it without hurting the feelings of Mrs. Howard, who loved them both, and whom they both revered. The dogs, apparently, were Clayton's prize pets. He'd raised them and groomed them for professional shows. If you could believe what he said, the two little creatures, expensive as they were, earned back in stud fees and show prizes more than they'd cost.

If you believed the old man, they were a major drain on the family's financial resources.

I imagine the truth lay somewhere in between, but it hardly mattered. The argument about the dogs was obviously one the two men had gone through before. They weren't trying to persuade each other, they just wanted to be insulting. The old man called the stepson a parasite and a wimp. The stepson called the old man a scrooge and a bully. They went around and around for ten minutes or better, snarling and braying at each other, until Mrs. Howard got them settled down.

It was the first time I'd ever seen H.R. Howard defer to anyone. Love, or respect, or whatever the emotion is that binds the fond husband to his spouse, had this old man tied up hand and foot. She quieted him down, she sweetened him up, she got him to apologize to Clayton, she even made him pet the dog. I was amazed.

And then Harry Brown spoke up with an embarrassed guffaw. "Well, say, Mr. Howard, I guess we better get on with things here or we'll be too late. Those dognappers want their money yet tonight, you know?"

He knew. The wife and the stepson left the room so that Harry, Mr.

Howard, and I could get down to business. "So do you know where the statue is in Columbus park?" the cop asked me, reaching into the pocket of his rumpled grey suitcoat and bringing out a folded-up sheet of paper.

"Yes, I do. Why?"

"That's where they want the money delivered." He opened up the paper and handed it to me.

IT WAS THE TYPICAL ANONYMOUS NOTE, PASTED TOGETHER with odd letters clipped from magazines and newspapers. The author knew how to spell, but other than that there wasn't much you could deduce about him with the naked eye. "Have you dusted this thing for fingerprints?" I asked Harry Brown as I took the note from his hand.

His face opened in a wide, sheepish grin. "Gee, no, I haven't." He shrugged his shoulders. "But, what the heck? That kind of 'scientific detection' never gets you anywhere, anyway." And just to reinforce his point, he accidentally on purpose scattered cigar ashes all over the evidence.

Which is what I meant about his incompetence. It always looked as if he didn't know his job, or was too slipshod to do it properly, so that he spent half his time making mistakes and the other half glossing them over. (Though not too much later, I would view this little incident in an entirely different light.)

But if Harry had bungled, Mr. Howard appeared not to notice. "I called in Detective Brown here as soon as we got the note, but then my wife suggested that the kidnapers might not want the police to be involved. So I called on you."

Harry Brown said he'd arranged that police patrol cars would stay clear of Columbus park all night. And he himself, being such a well-known public figure, couldn't deliver the money without the chance of being recognized as a cop. That was where I came in. "Mr. Howard says you can be trusted to do what you're told. So just please remember, the police, namely me, are investigating this case. We just want you to deliver the money. Okay?"

"Okay."

He patted my shoulder. "I knew we could count on you, sport."

Mr. Howard insisted that I watch while he counted out ten thousand dollars into a briefcase. He seemed awfully reluctant to part with it—his hands trembled and his brow sweat—but at last he did. And then Harry Brown escorted me out to my car, all the time giving me last-minute advice that I didn't need.

"I'm sure Mr. Howard appreciates you taking this job, sport," he said finally. "He knows this ain't your regular line."

"I think I can handle it."

He grinned broadly. "A tenderfoot boy scout could handle it, I think." This was the obnoxious side of his famous honesty: it came when you least appreciated it, and it always sounded a lot like sarcasm. "But Mrs. Howard and her son wanted a professional. So here you are." He scratched his head. "Beats me how they can get so worried over a little dog."

"Me, too," I said, then drove off into the darkness.

COLUMBUS PARK IS MORE LIKE A LITTLE WILDERNESS than a park. It was established years ago, during the depression, as a makework project for CCC boys and never completed. A circular drive had been cut, a statue erected, and some benches and picnic tables set out along the river bank, but nobody ever used the place, and the city had left it to vegetate and decay.

I parked my car by the fieldstone gateway and then walked back in along the road. And all the while I was walking, I couldn't help think about the ten thousand dollars I was carrying—almost as much money as I earned in six months. More than I earned after taxes. All going to some lowlife who had snatched a defenseless pooch from its home. It just didn't seem right. And I knew the snatcher would never be caught, not with the likes of Harry Brown on the case. It was just a crime, the whole thing was.

I left the money at the foot of the Discoverer's statue and made my way back toward the gateway, but as I walked carefully through the darkness, I heard, from somewhere behind me, the clunk of an oar against the hull of a rowboat. The kidnapper was coming by water to pick up his money: I couldn't resist trying to get a look at him.

So I left the road and carefully pushed my way through the underbrush, making a wide circle around the Columbus statue and briefcase full of money. I came to the river bank and then followed it in the direction I judged the sound to have come from, stepping carefully through the pitch-dark night, until I almost stumbled over the rowboat. Then I retreated into the bushes and settled down to wait.

A slight breeze rustled among the leaves of the trees. Minutes crept by so slowly they seemed like hours. The boat, half in the water, rocked slightly with the current. The water lapped and sighed. I heard soft footsteps.

And then the back of my head exploded like a fragmentation grenade, raining tiny slivers of pain throughout my skull. I lost

consciousness and rolled forward into an agonizing dream.

When I awoke, someone was wiping my face with a damp handkerchief. At my first moan, he clumsily pushed my left eyelid open and dazzled me with the beam of a flashlight. "You feeling all right, sport?"

He was Detective Harry Brown.

"What happened?" I said, sitting up groggily and rubbing my head.

"You got attacked from behind, sport. I guess the dognappers thought you was trying to spy on them."

"Well, they were wrong," I lied, not wanting to admit what I had tried and failed to do.

"They were, hey? So how come you're out here on the riverbank, instead of safe in your car?"

"I got lost in the darkness, I suppose."

"Got lost!" He chuckled drily. "Well, I guess old man Howard should have hired that boy scout instead. At least a scout can find his way home after dark!" He slapped my shoulder, just to show he was joking. "You don't get your merit badge for this exercise, sport. Heh, Heh!"

My skull felt like it was splitting open. I couldn't answer. I couldn't think. I could only feel pain.

I was beginning to not like Harry Brown.

I WENT HOME AND CLEANED UP, THEN LAY DOWN FOR A few hours with an ice pack under my head. And in the morning I felt pretty good. I called H.R. Howard at his office, but his secretary told me coldly that he couldn't be disturbed. So I called out to the house, hoping to get some news from the family about the missing dog.

Mrs. Howard answered the phone. In the background I could hear (it sounded like) a wild, subhuman moaning and wailing. Was one of the dogs sick or something? "How are you today?" I asked her politely. "How is everyone?"

"Not well, I'm afraid. Not well at all." The kidnapped dog had come home dead, cut up into several pieces. And her son was beside himself with grief and rage. "You should hear him lamenting. It would break your heart."

"I think I *can* hear him. Maybe you should call your doctor or someone to give him a sedative."

"The doctor's been here half the morning already. He's given Clayton so many injections that he's afraid any more might endanger the poor boy's health."

"Goodness me." I was impressed. Clayton might be a layabout and

a parasite, but he clearly had some awesome reserves of physical and emotional energy, far beyond the power of modern medicine to control. I pitied the dognapper if Clayton ever got his hands on him.

But naturally I didn't say any of this to his mother. Instead, I offered my condolences for the dog, hung up the phone, and tried to turn my attention to a small mountain of documents on my desk, the evidence in a price-fixing scam I was investigating for the county road commission.

Yet somehow I couldn't get the dognapping episode out of my mind. There had been something peculiar about the whole affair; all my investigative instincts told me so. I went out for a walk and thought about the whole thing. I thought and walked, walked and thought, until I'd reduced the whole problem to one simple question: why was Harry Brown the one who found me stretched out cold on the riverbank that night? Hadn't we agreed that he, the well-known police investigator, should stay away from the park entirely so as not to spook the dognappers? Why had he double-crossed H.R. Howard?

There were two possible explanations. The first was that Harry Brown had come secretly to the park to catch the dognappers with their loot. The second was that Harry himself was the dognapper, that the whole affair had been a double-cross from the beginning.

Which explanation was the most plausible?

Was Harry Brown the honest, though inept, cop he'd always seemed? Or were his honesty and his ineptitude both a big act? Had I been made a fool of by Honest Harry Brown?

MY HEAD BEGAN TO HUM AND A STRANGE, BITTER TASTE rose in my throat. I decided I needed something to get my mind off Harry Brown, so I stopped in at "Pud's Place," the neighborhood tavern. I drank a couple of beers and shot some pool with Pud's nephew, the resident hustler. "You ain't mad at me, are you?" the nephew asked as I handed over the five-spot we'd bet on the last game.

"No, I'm not. You won fair and square." I've always prided myself on being a good sport. A good sport.

"Well, you look awful mad."

I glanced at my reflection in the mirror behind the bar and saw that he was right. Without being aware of it, I had been scowling furiously. I was indeed angry, though not with him. I was angry because I had been duped, I was sure, by "Honest" Harry Brown. I felt humiliated. I felt abused. More than my head, and worse, my professional pride had suffered a heavy blow. And Harry Brown, the dognapper, had been the cause.

But there was nothing I could do about it now, because there was no longer any evidence: the anonymous letter was useless for fingerprinting, the dog was home again, though in several pieces, and the ten thousand dollars was no doubt by this time safely deposited somewhere.

Harry Brown had defeated me, I had to acknowledge, and I had no choice but to accept it, to be a sport, and get on with my affairs.

So I did, until two weeks later, when I learned that the second dog had been kidnapped from the Howard home. This time it was Mrs. Howard, not the old man, who phoned. "Have you notified the police?" I asked her.

"Yes. My husband called Mr. Brown right away."

And Mr. Brown, I thought, is keeping the whole thing under his hat. "Is he going to call me in, too?"

There was a pause. "Well, he did say that things hadn't worked out so well before. But Mr. Brown is . . . well, he doesn't inspire much confidence. So I just called you myself."

"You did the right thing." I urged her not to tell anyone that I was on the case. She agreed, and then she read me the ransom note they'd received, which was pretty much like the first one, except that the rendezvous this time was the old railyard downtown. "My husband was just furious at first, but now he seems resigned to paying the ransom."

"When's it to be delivered?"

"Tonight. My son's making the delivery."

I hung up the phone and, going to my closet, put on some of the dark, nondescript clothing that I wear for surveillance. As I dressed, I couldn't help wondering at Brown's lack of imagination, using the same gag twice in a row. And yet so far, apparently, the Howard family hadn't wised up to the situation.

Vowing silently that I would not be caught unprepared again, and remembering that bump on my head, I slipped a weighted flashlight into my back pocket. Then I went looking for Harry Brown.

HE WASN'T HARD TO FIND. LATE IN THE AFTERNOON, HE arrived at the Howard mansion, driving a dark-blue, unmarked police car. Two hours later, just after sunset, he departed in the same car, and I followed him.

He drove around the neighborhood for five or ten minutes, then doubled back and parked half a block away from the Howard's place. I thought to myself, he's been sent out to deliver the ransom money, maybe because Clayton was too nervous to go. And since there's no one to deliver it to but himself, he'll just pass the time here for an hour

or so, then drive back to the house and report "mission accomplished." Maybe this time he'll even leave the dog in one piece.

But I was wrong. In a little while another car, a light-colored little English sports car, turned out of the Howard's driveway, headed toward the center of town. Harry Brown followed the little car and I followed him.

Difficult as it is to follow another vehicle without being noticed, it's doubly difficult when that car is following yet another. I had to pay constant attention, thinking three moves ahead, to avoid Harry Brown's noticing me while he avoided the notice of whoever was in the little car. It was all quite a mental strain, and left me no spare moments to speculate on Brown's intentions or motives or anything else.

At last the little car came to a halt in the old railyard, and Harry Brown and I halted as well, at brief intervals, Brown parking behind the old depot, and I across the street, up the block a ways. The streets in this part of town were deserted after dark. The lampposts were infrequent and the pools of light around them, dim and yellow. Harry got out of his car and stood peering around the corner of the depot at the sports car.

I got out of my car and moved in slowly for a closer look, concealing myself in the doorway of a mouldering brick warehouse from which, though the sports car could not be seen, I could keep an eye on "Honest" Harry Brown.

FOR THE LONGEST TIME I WATCHED THE DETECTIVE while he watched whoever he was watching. The night grew darker, the moon came out, and the wind grew cold. The streets remained completely silent, until finally there came the well-oiled murmur of a Mercedes sedan, which cruised slowly about the neighborhood, passing in and out of view several times before it came to a stop (I judged by the sound) near the sports car in the railyard.

Harry Brown peered around the corner of the old depot, completely intent on whatever was happening by the two cars. "This is about it," I thought, and leaving the shelter of the doorway, I walked up slowly behind the corrupt cop. Now I could hear, very clearly, the sound of voices raised in harsh argument: Clayton Lavelle was nearly screeching in his rage; the other person answered him from time to time in a deeper, calmer voice.

When I had crept to within a few feet of Harry Brown, I saw him reach inside his rumpled suitcoat and pull a gun. "Holy cripes," I thought, "is he going to murder somebody?" I took the weighted flashlight from my pocket and jammed its blunt end into his ribs,

hoping it would feel like the muzzle of a gun. "Hold it right there, Harry," I said softly. "Don't turn around. Don't even move."

"What are you doing here?" he asked in a sharp whisper.

"I'm saving Clayton Lavelle's life, I think, though that's not what I set out to do. Why don't you drop that gun?"

"Oh, for the love of . . ." Harry began. But then the argument out in the railyard rose to a new pitch.

"Stop, Clayton, don't!" the deeper voice said angrily. "Don't you dare . . ." And then there were two shots.

"Oh, no!" Harry Brown trotted around the corner of the depot into the railyard, and I followed him.

Clayton Lavelle stood in the narrow space between his sports car and the Mercedes. He was looking down at something on the ground; he was laughing and sobbing at the same time.

"Mr. Lavelle, what have you done?" Harry asked in a patient, fatherly tone.

"I warned him," sobbed Clayton Lavelle. "I told him I would." He held a small, nickel-plated pistol limply in his right hand. On the ground at his feet lay H.R. Howard, his life blood leaking out of two holes in his chest, draining away into the cinders of the old railyard. "He killed my dogs. I killed him."

On the hood of the sports car someone had set a cardboard box: I peeked inside and saw several blood-soaked paper parcels. It was the remains of the second dog.

"Well, I'll be darned!" said Harry Brown. And in that moment I knew that in this whole affair, he'd been guilty of nothing worse than good intentions, nothing more sinister than ineptitude. He'd followed Clayton tonight for the same reason he'd followed me to Columbus Park two weeks before: he wanted to catch the dognapper. But the dognapper had been too smart for him, just as he'd been too smart for me. And as he'd been too smart for a lot of shrewd business competitors over the years.

H.R. Howard had faked the dognappings himself, in order to rid his home of a yappy little nuisance without his wife's knowing. But, somehow, Clayton Lavelle had known.

He looked up at Harry and me now with tears in his eyes. "I knew from the start, I just guessed it, but I wouldn't tell mother. It would have broken her heart. So I warned him; my little Astarte had to come back unharmed, or else. But he . . . he . . ."

"He underestimated you, I guess," said Harry Brown. ●

The Feeb Diamond—conservatively worth thirty million dollars—had been heisted, and Marv Drexler of the Continental Mutual Insurance Company had damn well better come up with it—or else!

All That Glitters

by TERRY BLACK

SO IT CAME TO THIS: EITHER KILL THE GUY OR PUT HIM on the payroll. I thought about it and decided to strangle the little twerp. But J.B. said otherwise, and he's the boss.

I could see his point. It hadn't been a good year for the Continental Mutual Insurance Agency; a steady stream of blunders, bad risks and failed gambles had put the agency in hotter water than ever before. There just wasn't much slack anymore.

First it was the teen rock star who insured his vocal cords right before the onset of puberty. Heads rolled over that one. Then the real estate broker who insured the famed Bentley Arms Hotel two weeks before an earthquake made it into a trailer park. And the short guy with a nervous twitch, insuring his investment in twelve tracts of prime

Florida swampland.

J.B. tried to hedge his bets by insuring Continental with *another* insurance company—a firm that, like us, insured almost anything—but they went belly-up before we did. So it was no surprise when the Old Man called a staff conference without telling anyone what for.

"How bad is it, Marv?" asked Flavia, my Girl Friday, stopping me in the hallway. Flavia has a blinding smile, a voluptuous figure and an irritating directness. I tried to be reassuring but it sounded hollow, even to me.

"Don't panic," I said, resting a hand on her well-turned shoulder. "We'll pull through. Hell, I've faced tougher spots than this one."

"You've gone broke, too," she reminded me. "As I recall, J.B. found you in an unemployment line. You don't want to go back and renew old acquaintances, do you?"

I shuddered. Being unemployed was way down there on my list of favorite things, somewhere between tattooing myself with a soldering iron and performing my own dental surgery. I looked at my watch and said, "Meeting time. Let's go."

FLAVIA AND I SHUFFLED INTO A CONFERENCE ROOM AND mingled with a horde of disgruntled co-workers. There were no chairs; the only furniture was a water cooler, now empty, and the podium J.B. stood behind. Part of the ceiling was torn up in one corner, where the roof had leaked and rotted the corkboard.

"I suppose you're wondering," said J.B., measuring his words, "why I've called you here today."

All of us nodded and mumbled yeah. I noticed Russ O'Neill, trouble-shooter and tech wizard, leaning against the far wall with arms folded. Russ was a consultant, not an employee; he looked more bored than fearful.

"I won't mince words," the Old Man went on. "Here's the bottom line: we're broke. Busted. As of this moment, Continental Mutual is bankrupt. I'll try to cover this week's payroll, but that's about all I can promise."

Before the shock-waves of disbelief could reach their full crescendo, J.B. executed a nimble sidestep and vanished out the side door. Flavia was clinging to me for support, her eyes like dinnerplates, but I shook her loose and raced off after the boss.

I caught up with him in his office, stuffing papers into a leather satchel. The wall safe hung open behind him, stripped clean. I gripped him by the forearm and said, "Aren't you being a little premature?"

"Better safe than sorry," he said, tossing a folder into the waste can.

"The trick with a losing venture is to get out fast, cover your tracks, salt away a little something for next time. Excuse me, your elbow's blocking the delinquent accounts drawer."

"J.B., listen to me. We're not licked yet. Let's go down fighting."

"You go down. I'm going elsewhere."

"Wait a minute, will you?" I followed him over to the shredder, where he started feeding in typed sheets with a horrible grinding noise. "Just tell me what's going on. One minute we're holding our own, the next it's the end of the world. What the hell happened?"

"Someone stole the Feeb Diamond," he said, still shredding.

I WHISTLED. THE FEEB DIAMOND, AS YOU'RE PROBABLY aware, is the world's largest symmetrically perfect diamond, a gem so valuable its worth has never been accurately estimated. The owner took a wild guess and insured it for thirty million—through Continental Mutual. Faced with that kind of a claim, I don't blame J.B. for cutting his losses and doing a fast fade.

But I wasn't licked yet. "Suppose we get it back? If we can find and recover it, we won't have to pay a dime."

J.B. stuck a fresh stack of papers into the shredder. "How do you propose to do that, Marv? The police are stumped, the gallery's baffled, it's the unsolved crime of the century. What are you, Travis Goddamned McGee?"

"Trust me," I insisted.

J.B.'s answer was cut off when Russ poked his suntanned features into the office and said, "Guess you don't need me anymore, huh?"

"Nonsense," I said, grabbing him by the collar. "We've got a case that's right up your alley. I'm in charge and you're my assistant. What do you say?"

"Take a hike, Marv." He frowned at my hand on his shirt. "I'm self-employed, remember?"

"Fine. You're in charge and I'm *your* assistant. Gives you a writeoff at tax time."

"I don't need one."

"Do it for me."

"Be seeing you."

"For the company, then. Think of it as a public service."

"On commission plus overtime?"

"Deal." I spun around and stabbed a finger at the Old Man's chest. "How about it, J.B.? Give us a chance—we'll have your diamond back before you can divest your debentures."

J.B. paused in mid-shred. His lips moved silently, working through

all the angles, and a smile began to form on those Satanic features. I wondered what he was thinking.

"All right," he said at last. "Go to it boys. Try and hold down your expenses, since I won't pay them, and don't get caught doing anything I wouldn't do." He fished a card from his breast pocket and flicked it in my direction. "Any problems, call me. If I don't answer right away, keep trying."

"Thanks, J.B.," I said, fingering the card. It was silver and black, with a bunny design and a phone number in bright red letters. "We'll keep in touch."

He nodded and turned back to the shredder. Russ and I headed for the door.

THE FIRST PHASE OF OUR CRIME-BUSTING ADVENTURE was to visit the scene of the crime: the Pepperton Gardens in Pasadena, treasure-house for some of the world's oldest and most venerable art classics. Russ took me there in his '73 Barracuda, rarely topping the speed limit as we threaded the labyrinth of crosstown freeways.

At last we pulled up to a wrought-iron gate, where a septuagenarian security guard asked to see our passes. In no time we were whisked between rose bushes and close-packed orchids into the vast interior of Pepperton Mansion, where every hallway reeked of mildewed value.

"You must be the insurance people," said a slender man with a spotted necktie, stepping up to greet us. He wore rose-tinted sunglasses, even indoors, looking for all the world like an effeminate Clint Eastwood. "About time you folks got here. I'm Denton Cadbury, director of procurements. You are . . . ?"

"Marv Drexler, Claims Adjustments," I said, handing him a card. Russ gave him one too, and asked to see where the theft had occurred. Cadbury nodded and led the way.

Our destination was a vast room with a marble floor, buttressed walls and a ceiling you couldn't see. The stolen gem had shared this room with two Picassos and a Holstein engraving. The display stand where the Feeb Diamond wasn't was a felt-covered pedestal with a folding glass cover, standing open.

Cadbury showed us a Polaroid of the celebrated property: an impossibly large, multifaceted jewel, wide as a half dollar, glistening on the velvet with a distinctive orange cast. Russ and I agreed that it looked well worth stealing.

"Nice of you to say so," said Cadbury, fingering his sunglasses. "How do you plan to settle the claim? We don't take credit cards."

"First things first," I said. "What kind of security does this place

have?"

"Impenetrable. The room—in fact, the entire building—is honeycombed with photoelectric sensors. The slightest light source raises a wail that'd wake the dead. One time it went off by accident and caused a German shepherd to commit suicide."

"So how'd this guy get in to steal your precious diamond?"

"Beats me. You're the investigators. Examine something."

Russ was way ahead of him, poking and prodding inside the display case. "What's this?" he asked, indicating a tiny rubber tube. The tube sprouted from the velvet and was held by clamps above the diamond's ex-resting place.

"It's part of an air-circulation system, designed to keep foreign particles away from the gem. Nothing you need to worry about." Cadbury smirked. "Unless you think the diamond was sucked out through that little hose."

Russ shook his head and replaced it, frowning. I turned to the director and poked him in the sternum. "I think I know the answer," I said.

"No fooling," he sneered. "Who did it?"

"You did. As director of procurements you have easy access to this building—enough to be quite familiar with its layout. In the past few months you learned to enter the building, climb the stairs, cross this room and snatch the diamond—all without having to see! With no light source there was nothing to trip the photo sensors, and you walked off happy as a clam."

He snorted. "Brilliant, Holmes. There's just one hitch. The display case opens only to a coded touch signal. A bad signal triggers the alarm, and you can't enter a good one without seeing. Try it if you don't believe me." He pointed to a small keypad at the base of the display stand.

A hot flush of embarrassment crept up over my collar. "Skip it," I said. "Russ, you ready to go?"

"Okay," he said, closing the case. Both of us left the building, with Cadbury staring balefully after us through his rose-colored sunglasses.

"I STILL THINK HE DID IT," I SAID LATER. "THAT LITTLE twerp is up to something."

J.B. nodded and shifted his girth to a more comfortable position on a rough-hewn packing crate. The crate sat in the center of his office and was stamped SOLD—PROPERTY OF SID'S USED FURNITURE.

"Why do you say that?" he asked.

"Because he seemed—well, too confident when I accused him of the

crime. Anyone that excitable should have freaked when I made the suggestion. But he was prepared for it, like someone reading from a script."

J.B. swung his gaze at Russ and pinned him in the spotlight. "What do you think?"

"Well, I've been checking into Cadbury's background," said Russ thoughtfully. "He's a regular Thomas Edison. By age nineteen he was a bona fide expert in half a dozen fields: gemology, mechanical engineering, fiber optics—"

The rest was forestalled when a grimy workman in coveralls trudged into the room and presented J.B. with a clipboard. "Sign here," he said.

I glared at him. "Oh, for Christ's sake—"

"Stow it, Marv." J.B. signed the clipboard and returned it. "Sid's is giving us top dollar on most of the furniture. That should help cover bankruptcy expenses—which I'll be filing as soon as you and Russ have given up looking for the diamond."

"What makes you think we'll give up?"

"Matter of time, my boy. Especially in view of your inability to suggest a plausible theft scenario. How did Cadbury—or whoever it was—commit his crime? Riddle me that."

"He won't have to," said Russ, scratching his chin. "I've got the answer."

Both of us looked at him in amazement, like heathens witnessing a miracle. "Honest," he said.

"SO WHY NOT JUST GRAB HIM?" I ASKED THE NEXT MORNING. Russ nosed the Barracuda off the freeway and headed for the Pepperton Gardens. "Why all of this Mission Impossible stuff?"

"More conclusive," he said simply. "I want to catch him in the act."

"You're sure this'll work?"

"Of course not, Marv. That's what makes it interesting." He didn't say another word until we pulled up to the guard gate and bade good morning to the aging sentry. The old man waved us through without asking about the pile of gear stowed in the back.

Russ parked in a handicapped space in front of the mansion and hastily left the car. "Give me a hand with this," he said, pulling a tripod-mounted projector from the back seat. "Cadbury's due in five minutes, and I want to be all set up when he gets here."

The two of us clum-sized the stuff upstairs, raising a few eyebrows among the security staff on duty. I sweet-talked us into the display room, using Cadbury's name and a bit of bluster, and Russ promptly

started building his better mousetrap. He was tightening the final screws when the door burst open and Cadbury's shrill falsetto shrieked, "What are *you* doing here?"

"Continuing our investigations," I said, bounding over to intercept him. "I'd like to ask some more questions."

"This should have been cleared with me," he snapped, looking disdainfully around the room. "What the hell is—"

"Let's talk sanitation," I asked, grabbing his shoulder and steering him toward the display case. "Has this place been inspected recently by the Health Department?"

"Of course, fool! With all these masterpieces on display, we can't allow—" He broke off, eyeballs popping, with a gasp of stark horror.

"What is it?" I asked innocently.

"BUGS!" he shrieked, sprinting for the far wall. On his way there pulled off one of his shoes, nearly toppling himself, and smashed it repeatedly into the wall. "Kill them, kill them, kill—"

He broke off, suddenly baffled. He looked at the wall, the shoe, and the wall again. I took pity on him and said, "Don't worry, Denton. They're not real bugs, just projections. In fact, they're only visible in the infrared spectrum."

"SO THAT ABOUT WRAPS IT UP," SAID RUSS, DUSTING HIS hands with a grin. "I knew there was something phony about those sunglasses the first time I saw them. I got to thinking, 'What if you knew a little about optics, and wanted to see in the dark? How would you do it?' And the answer came up, 'Trick sunglasses.' "

"Real sharp, Einstein," said Cadbury.

Russ shrugged. "I do my best. I'm betting those sunglasses are actually infrared scanners, allowing you to see from the residual heat in this building. The only thing that stumped me was the power supply."

He walked around behind Cadbury.

"Then I noticed your little neck-strap here—" he fingered a strap holding the glasses on "--and wondered if a wire could be passed through it, under your hair and collar, and down to a power pack strapped behind you." He pressed the small of Cadbury's back and said, "Ah! There it is."

"It does come in handy," the director admitted.

"Not any more," I said grinning. I was still chuckling when Cadbury pressed a button on his palm and all the lights went out.

Instinctively I lunged forward. But Russ and I got in each other's way and by the time we were disentangled a door opened and slammed behind us. Shouts and footsteps echoed from the corridor. I leapt up,

threw open the door and found myself staring into the muzzle of a service revolver with a grim-faced guard behind it.

"Not one move," he snapped. "Cadbury said to hold you here while he called the police, and that's just what I plan to do."

"You little fool," I began, but Russ stopped me with an upraised hand.

"Don't worry about it," he said casually. "We want to give him a little head-start, anyway."

"But why?"

Russ leaned against the wall and lit up a cigarette. "So he'll have plenty of time to get the diamond before we home in on the tracer in his collar," he said.

I HAVE TO GIVE RUSS SOME CREDIT HERE. IT WAS REALLY a perfect plan, simple, elegant and ingenious. I must have said so a hundred times as we sat there in his Barracuda, trying to pick up the signal. I even said so after we realized that it wasn't going to work.

Not that we gave up easily. After the guard let us go, we activated the tracker and waited for over five hours, almost six. But even Russ' patience was not infinite; finally he closed the cover on his portable tracking unit and said, "Damn."

"What do you think happened?" I asked stifling a yawn.

"Any number of things," he admitted. "He found the tracer and flushed it. He hopped on a plane and flew outside the 200-mile effective radius. Or maybe it's just busted." He leaned back and closed his eyes. "Like us."

"I guess we should bring in the police now," I said reluctantly. An APB might track him down where our dime-store gadget had failed, but I hated to complicate things by bringing in LA's Finest—especially if they impounded the gem, once found. Assuming they could even find it.

With a heavy sigh I reached for the phone on Russ' dashboard and prepared to send for the cavalry. But it rang in my hand before I could lift it.

"Hello?" I said, startled.

"I thought I'd find you here," said Flavia's voice. "I'd like to forward a call to you."

"Who from?"

"Denton Cadbury."

I goggled at Russ and said, "Sure, put him on."

"Is this Mr. Drexler?" asked Cadbury.

"The same. Where are you?"

"In hiding."

"What do you want?"

"A deal," he said smoothly. "Cash and dash. You get your diamond and I get lots of money, under the table, no muss, no fuss. What do you say?"

"How much?"

"Enough to tide me over for a while. Say, half a million. You'll never miss it."

"Suppose we go to the police?"

"Suppose you do. What would it get you? Think fast, Drexler, I'm a busy man."

I looked at Russ. He shrugged. This was going to need J.B.'s approval, of course, but I was certain he'd rather pay half a million than sixty times that. "Deal," I said.

"One more thing," Cadbury added. "I get shy around publicity. No one finds out about this—not the cops, or the press, or especially Pepperton Gardens." He chuckled. "It's always nice to stay on good terms with your employers."

From there we went on to discuss the terms of payment, and Cadbury agreed to replace the gem surreptitiously as soon as he had the money. The bills were marked as a precaution, but this turned out to be unnecessary—Cadbury was as good as his word. As soon as we paid him, the next day's headlines proclaimed the mysterious return of the fabulous Feeb Diamond.

So Cadbury got his money, we got off the hook and Pepperton got their diamond back—and everyone was satisfied, right?

Dream on, Clyde.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN, WE'RE STILL BROKE?" I DEMANDED the next morning. "We got off cheap on this one—hell, we've paid out more than this before! So what's wrong now?"

J.B. crossed his legs and rested his head against the windowsill. The packing crate was gone, but somewhere he'd scrounged a folding chair. "It's not the Feeb Diamond," he said wearily. "It's the Moon of Ishtar."

"The Moon of what?"

"Ishtar. The second-largest symmetrically perfect diamond in the world." He thrust a copy of Newsweek in my direction; the cover story explored the rash of diamond thefts sweeping the nation, from the Feeb heist in Pasadena to the Moon of Ishtar theft from the Croft Foundation in New Jersey.

Both diamonds appeared side-by-side atop the article: the Feeb, with

its delicate orange cast, and Ishtar's Moon, glistening bright blue on a satin pillow. Ishtar's Moon was a brand-new purchase by the Croft Foundation, and a sorely missed one.

"How much is Ishtar worth?" I asked halfheartedly.

J.B. spread his hands. "A bargain," he said bitterly. "Only twenty-five mil. Less than ten times what we can afford."

"Knock knock," said Russ, at the door.

J.B. looked up impatiently. "What now?"

"I just got a telegram from our east coast branch," he said, holding out a crumpled form. "Not sure what it means, but I thought I'd share it with you."

He laid it on the table and we crowded in to read. It said, FYI: TRACER SIGNAL DETECTED INCOMING FLIGHT LAGUARDIA AIRPORT 10/23 APPROX 3PM STOP SIGNAL PERSISTS 8 HOURS STOP NOT ONE OF OURS RUSS ARE YOU AT IT AGAIN—and it was signed, HOBARTH.

"What do you make of that?" said Russ.

"That's just about the time we lost Cadbury," I said thoughtfully. Gears were turning in my cranium at top speed. "So he hopped on a plane for Jersey and got there right about the time the second theft was committed. But why risk two jobs so close together—unless . . ."

"Fiber optics," said Russ, snapping his fingers.

"Right. We've got to see this guy right away."

DENTON CADBURY WAS VERY GOOD ABOUT KEEPING THE appointment. He showed up at the appointed hour, walked in as if he owned the place and took a seat on a folding chair in J.B.'s office, facing us. He was still wearing his sunglasses.

"Not the most sumptuous environment I've ever seen," he said, looking disdainfully around.

"Hard times," I explained. "By the way, you don't need the sunglasses anymore."

"I like them," he said. "But you didn't ask me here to talk fashion."

"Damn straight." I bridged my fingers. "Look, Denton, let's skip the games. What do you want from us?"

"Why, nothing. I thought that was all worked out. I've got the money, Pepperton has the Feeb—"

"I'm talking about the Moon of Ishtar."

He snorted. "Why, what makes you think that I—"

"The MO fits you like a sock. But there's more. I got to wondering why you'd steal Ishtar so soon after Feeb. Russ was wondering too. So we got together and came up with a fascinating answer."

"And that is . . . ?"

"The Feeb Diamond *is* the Moon of Ishtar. They're the same jewel. In order to recover it one place you have to steal it from someplace else."

J.B. lunged to his feet, roaring like a lion. "Marv, that's the dumbest thing I've ever heard! Why, they don't even resemble each other—the Feeb is orange and the Moon is blue! Which color is it?"

"Neither," I said. "It's clear. The color of the diamond depends on the display case it's resting in."

"But how—"

"Remember that little tube I found?" Russ broke in. "It wasn't for air at all—it was for light. Using fiber optics technology, Cadbury sent a stream of colored light through a flexible tube to illuminate the diamond and change its color. Presto chango, exit the Feeb and enter the Moon."

"Just in time for Croft's new purchase," I added. "Of course, when we got wise you had to go steal it back—which solved one problem but caused another. So we're hooked on the horns of a dilemma, friends."

"I see," said J.B. worriedly. "It doesn't matter who we give the diamond to—the other guy's still going to file a claim. It's an insoluble problem."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," said Cadbury, fingering his sunglasses.

SO THAT'S HOW WE CAME TO HAVE A JEWEL THIEF ON the payroll. Each month Cadbury steals the Moon and replaces the Feeb; just about the time Croft is filing a claim he steals the Feeb and replaces the Moon. An awful lot of people are getting real suspicious, but so far nothing's been proven.

Me, I don't ask silly questions, I just do my job and hope for the best. We got all our office furniture back—at an outrageous markup from old Sid—and the breadlines are still mercifully free of Continental employees.

Of course, these days I'm a lot more careful buying jewelry. I can't help wondering how many Cadburys are out there, swapping gems around. But I don't worry about it too much; remember, all that glitters is not gulled.

You should pardon the expression.



Mike's Mail

SHAYNE BOOKS

I am receiving Mike Shayne Magazine from you. I enjoy it very much. I also have collected some of his novels in paperback, some back to 1940. I am trying to find out how I can get some copies I don't have, and they are not in publication now. Since you seem to have the rights to using his name on a magazine, you might be able to help me. I have been told his books may be reprinted again.

Carol Arbuckle
653 S. 96th St.
Mesa, AZ 85208

Raven House reprinted the very first Shayne novel, a few years ago, but that seems to have been it. Perhaps some of our readers can help you. Meanwhile, the best place to look is in stores selling used paperbacks.

ENOUGH OBSCENITIES

I enjoy the variety of your stories. However, I would appreciate not having another Mike Shayne with a "child abuse" aspect: "Sandcastles."

There are enough obscenities in the daily paper and I read MSMM for "healthy escape and entertainment."

Peter D. Patsakos, D.C., P.C.
831 Fuller Ave., N.E.
Grand Rapids, MI 49503

You may recall that in the story Mike Shayne himself was pretty upset about it. He'd much rather devote his detecting to those healthy escapes and entertainment: shootings, knifings, poisonings, blackmail, explosions, mayhem—things you never find in the daily paper.

Eric wasn't afraid of the law. What could they do? There were too many like him, and there weren't enough jails to hold them all. They put you in and they let you out; that was all there was to it!

End of the Line

by LEE DUGON

THEY WERE SO STUPID, ERIC THOUGHT. THAT'S WHAT made it so easy.

Take that damn fool woman with the gold chain as thick as your wrist, sitting there immersed in her art magazine as if she were sitting safely at home in some suburban living room, surrounded by expensive houses on one-acre lots, municipal swimming pools, and overstaffed police departments.

You couldn't count on that kind of safety even in the suburbs, much less on the subway at midnight. She was begging for it, Eric thought; it would be a crime not to mug her.

He fingered the bulk of the knife in his pocket, pretending to doze. It waited to do his bidding, as always, Why slop dirty dishes, when your knife could get you more in a minute than you could earn in a week?

THEY WERE APPROACHING THE END OF THE LINE, AND the car was almost empty. Besides Eric and the woman with the chain, there were two old men, a grey-haired woman with more jewelry than she needed, and a young black girl, very pregnant. One of the men, a foreigner by his looks, kept checking the time on a gold watch the size of a hand grenade. The other snored in his seat, head flung back, toothless mouth gaping like a cellar door. He wore a ring with a large diamond that glittered under the car's sickly fluorescent lights.

It was the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Even the pregnant girl carried a large, leather purse, resting at her feet like a travelling salesman's kit.

The woman with the chain flipped a page in her magazine. For a moment Eric could have sworn he'd seen her before. But that was an

illusion. She was just one of a type. They must turn them out on an assembly line, he thought.

He knew the type well. She was tall, willowy, with patrician features under an aureole of soft chestnut ringlets. She wore calfskin sandals, tailored grey slacks, and a navy blue cape. Her nails were meticulously manicured. She was the type whose daddy or husband was vice president of a big corporation and bought her everything. She went to art museums, watched public television, and once a year went to the opera.

Eric found his blood pounding with an undirected rage. He didn't understand it, but he wanted to see blood and tears streak ragged lines across her flawless makeup job.

Be cool, he told himself. You'll get your chance.

How many times would people like him have to hurt people like her before they stopped riding the subway?

The train rattled through the darkness.

WHEN YOU GOT DOWN TO IT, ERIC THOUGHT, THERE were two kinds of people—those who took, and those who were taken from. He'd known it for years; there was no mystery to it.

His parents hadn't known. His father worked like a dog for twenty years to keep his family living on beans and chicken in a lousy apartment that froze in the winter and sweltered in the summer, until the day his foreman ordered him up a makeshift ladder to fetch a crate of parts. The ladder gave, and so did Frank Scrope's back. Too bad.

Eric remembered his father sitting in the kitchen, drinking cheap wine and throwing bottles at snakes and rats nobody else ever saw. And one day he was gone.

Louise Scrope went on the welfare rolls; if she worked, she lost her benefits. She couldn't earn enough to abandon welfare, but she could supplement her checks and put food on the table until they found out she was working and cut her benefits.

For all Eric knew, she was still in that roach-infested hole on Adams Street, trying to find a sugar daddy who'd keep her kids from starving.

His parents weren't takers.

Eric learned about taking things as soon as he was old enough to cut school and hang out on the street. He watched, amazed, when his cousin Mike turned a new kid's pockets inside out and took a handful of change. When the kid threatened to tell his mother, Mike pitched him off the roof into the alley, four stories below. It had been that easy.

Every time the law put him away, Eric learned more about taking. He wasn't afraid of the law. What could the law do? There were too

many like him, and there weren't enough jails and reformatories to hold them all. They put you in and they let you out; that was all there was to it.

Taking was the way. As long as you had your knife, you didn't go hungry, you didn't freeze, and you didn't crawl. Eric crawled to no one; he was a taker, not a crawler. His knife made him a man, not a dog.

It was so stinking easy. They never expected it to happen to them, although the papers and the news broadcasts were full of it happening to everybody else.

Money doesn't lie on the sidewalk, waiting to be picked up. You take, or your daddy or your lover takes it for you. If you took it by buying a semihabitable building cheap and renting it to poor people for every cent they had, The Man smiled upon you. If you took it with a knife, you had to watch your step. But there was no difference.

But there was more to it than just taking money. You took away their sense that they wrote the rules that made the world go 'round. You took away their sense of being right, of being safe, of knowing where they'd be an hour from now. Sometimes you took their lives.

It takes life to make life. A cow dies so you can have a cheeseburger. A tree dies so you can have a chair. The more life you take, the more life you make.

Eric's knife had proved it a dozen times, maybe more. He couldn't say for sure. There were a hundred killings a month in this city; they couldn't begin to catch all the killers.

You lived, they died. If the cops gunned him down tomorrow, Eric thought, he'd come out ahead. He'd already taken far more than they could ever make him pay back.

THE TRAIN CLATTERED ON TOWARD THE END OF THE line shedding a few more riders at every stop; but the ones in Eric's car stayed.

The woman with the chain smiled to herself and turned another page of the magazine. The lurching of the car imparted a gentle waving motion to her hair. For the first time, Eric noticed she was wearing earrings—the round, gold wire kind that looked big enough to be bracelets.

Eric smiled, too. They put so much into every refined mandarin gesture, a lifetime of learning how to show class; and he could wipe it out with a flick of his blade. He remembered another woman, enough like this one to be her sister, and another gold chain. He swiped her across the neck and took the chain, and snorted a couple of lines of

coke that night to celebrate.

Eric didn't drink, and he looked down on those who did. He didn't want to be like his father. Wine dulled the senses, clogged the reflexes, slowed the knife down just enough to leave survivors who could identify you.

He was careful to avoid smack, too, although its temptations were strong. Smack turned your brain to jelly, and you wound up going out when your habit told you to go out, instead of when you wanted to. And no matter how much you took, the pusher always got it in the end.

Better to stick to coke, and speed when you got tired and slow.

Even so, Eric had been thinking about giving up drugs altogether. Drugs impaired your judgment; he'd snorted a line or two this morning, and he could still feel it playing subtle tricks on him.

Take the old man with the watch, the dude who looked like a foreigner. Now Eric was starting to think he'd seen him before, too. There was something about the way the man kept checking the time, twirling his white moustache, that gave Eric the willies. Hadn't he once stomped a man who looked like that, and taken a watch? Eric couldn't make his thoughts stand still long enough to remember.

Tomorrow he was giving up coke. The stuff was getting to him, and he couldn't allow that. As his knife shone, so his mind must shine, straight and sharp. The hunter must be worthy of his blade.

Eric didn't dwell on the thought that he, too, might someday grow old—too old to hunt, too old to make a living with his knife. He could no more see himself getting old than he could picture himself attending a Broadway play with the woman with the chain on his arm.

Most of the people he knew died young.

But you didn't think about death—not when you could take life.

It was time.

HE COULD HAVE EVERYTHING HE WANTED BEFORE THE
train hit the next stop. Then, as usual, he'd run out the door and vanish into the night. He seldom worried about witnesses; to their kind, his kind all looked alike.

He didn't like to leave witnesses if he could help it. There were five people here, each of them as helpless as a wino lying sprawled in the gutter. He held their lives in the palm of his hand.

If he killed one, he would have to kill them all. If he killed none—but life feeds on life.

He wasn't up to thinking about it; it made his head ache. He'd take the fancy lady's gold chain and let his instincts decide. He'd trusted them before, and they'd never failed him.

The train lurched, waking up the old man with the diamond ring by snapping his bald head forward and back. He yawned, blinked, and rose from his seat to read the graffiti on an advertisement for milk of magnesia. He shuffled down the aisle, going hand over hand from rail to rail, and dropped himself into a seat by the far door where he could stretch out his feet. In a moment he was snoring again.

The old foreigner with the watch was equally restless; his stop must be coming up. He peered out the window into the featureless dark, then settled back with his hands in his lap, gazing at the sea of butts on the floor.

Eric got up slowly, his hand on the knife in his pocket, and approached the lady with the art magazine. Across the aisle, the old woman with the jewels watched him keenly, perhaps sensing what was to come. Let her, Eric thought; there's nowhere to run. If she'd been hit on the subway before, she must know that.

The pregnant girl reached down and picked up her purse with both hands, snuggling it across her thighs like a pedigreed cat.

THEY KNEW WHAT WAS COMING—ALL OF THEM BUT THE fancy lady, who kept her eyes glued to the magazine until Eric stopped in front of her, standing over her like a prison chaplain telling the condemned man it was time to go. His pulse raced, and there was a soft roaring in his ears. He was on center stage. He was the man, they were the sheep.

He pulled out the knife. The blade snapped open with a click that could be heard over the tumult of the wheels. Out of the corner of his eye, Eric saw the foreigner sidling toward the door between the cars.

"You!" His voice boomed like a garage door slamming shut. "Don't move, sucker! Don't anybody move. You behave yourselves and you won't get hurt."

The woman put down her magazine, but her head remained bowed like a sacrifice waiting for the ax.

"Look at me, lady."

Eric reached down for the chain as the woman raised her head.

She was smiling, she was floating out of the chair, and Eric suddenly realized why she'd seemed so familiar. Her long, elegant neck was traversed by an open, bloodless wound, a deep, smooth incision like your knife makes when you flick your wrist just so.

Behind him, the others were closing in.

He'd seen them all before.

WHO IS THIS FEARLESS MAN
WHO RISKS HIS LIFE AT EVERY
TURN TO THWART JAP AT-
TEMPTS AT SABOTAGE?

THE MASKED MARVEL

WILLIAM FORREST · LOUISE CURRIE
JOHNNY ARTHUR · ROD BACON
RICHARD CLARKE

A REPUBLIC SERIAL IN 12 CHAPTERS

LICENSED TO NZFCO

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

*It would be folly for anyone to try to cheat the Old Man.
Anyone attempting it would soon be dead!*

The Perfectionists

by WILLIAM F. SMITH

JINGLING DOORCHIMES CAUSED THE MAN SEATED AT THE desk behind the counter to look up and nod recognition to the customer who had just entered his shop, which according to the sign in Switzerland's three official languages specialized in the repair of clocks, watches, and small appliances.

"Ah, Mr. Cardoza," the shopkeeper said, rising and extending his right hand, "you are returned precisely at the specified time. Your merchandise is ready, providing of course that you have brought with you the necessary funds."

Mark Cardoza shook the offered hand, then tapped the slight bulge on the right side of the brown tweed jacket, hanging loosely on his tall, thin frame. "Right here, Herr Altmann," he said, giving the shopkeeper a friendly grin. He knew that Altmann spoke three Swiss languages—French, German, and Italian—but when the merchant spoke English, his slight accent was predominantly German. Not surprising since his shop was situated in Basal, an ideal location for a man of Altmann's talents, as the city was only a few kilometers from both the French and German borders, with easy access to the autoroutes and the Autobahn.

"Of course I'd like to see your workmanship before handing over so much cash."

"To be sure." Altmann motioned to the open door a few feet from his desk. "Why don't you just step into the back room and have yourself a look at the marvelous job I have done for you. You will be pleased."

CARDOZA FOLLOWED THE GRAY-HAIRED MERCHANT into the small room. Two tables formed a right angle in the far left corner. On one were various types of meters, electronic testing

equipment, a radio transmitter, and a small computer with a video display terminal. The other was obviously used as a workbench; a dismantled foodmixer was spread neatly over its surface. Hand and electric tools were fastened on the wall behind this table, each one's place outlined in green paint. The wall to the right of the door was lined with three sections of steel shelves. The first was filled to capacity with neatly-labeled boxes containing spare parts; the second held several items to be repaired; the third had completed appliances ready to be picked up by customers. Cardoza saw his lying next to a small radio.

He looked about and whistled. "I'm impressed. A place for everything and everything in its place."

"Yes," Altmann said, "Disorder is something I detest. One cannot do quality work when there is disorder. I must admit that I am a perfectionist. However, you are also on in your profession. *Ein Taschenspieler*— prestidigitator, is it not?"

The American smiled. "That's the big word for sleight-of-hand artist. Most people would probably call me a magician."

"Ah yes. *Ein Zauberer*. The Great Cardoza. I have seen you perform some months ago in Paris. You make the cards and other objects appear and disappear in the thin air. Actually you have them all the while in your hands, but the spectators cannot see them, is it not so?"

"Let's just say that the hand is quicker than the eye."

"Yes, but you also make the grand illusions. The ones in which you use large cabinets, boxes within boxes, and so forth. These must all be precisely made and the timing must be exact in order that the trick succeeds. In this respect, too, you are also the perfectionist. I believe myself knowledgeable enough to understand how most of these tricks are accomplished. However, the illusion where you float the pretty remark young lady out over the audience is truly able. You would care to share with me the secret of this illusion?"

"Sorry, Herr Altmann. I am the only magician who can perform it, and I'm not about to reveal how I do it. Well, may I see it?"

"Oh, forgive me, Mr. Cardoza." Altmann crossed over and picked up a book from the third set of shelves. He handed it to Cardoza, who opened it gingerly and slowly flipped the pages from front to back.

"Herr Altmann, you are trying to swindle me. You expect me to pay ten thousand dollars for this? I can't see that you've done anything to it. It's the same book I brought you last week."

Altmann smiled. "Exactly so. However, it is also much different. The book you have brought me was perfectly harmless. The one you hold in your hand is lethal. That is what you wanted, was it not? That is why you must pay so much for it."

"Yes, but I expected you would hollow out the middle and put the explosives inside with some sort of timing device."

"That, my dear Mr. Cardoza, a rank amateur could do. Such a device would be detectable and virtually useless for your purposes. The book you hold in your hand appears no different from an ordinary book. It can be read from cover to cover without the rader suspecting he is holding a deadly bomb. Yet at the precise moment you select, it will explode and annihilate anyone who is standing within eight to ten meters."

"How?"

"Ah, Mr. Cardoza, you want me to inform you of my secrets, yet you do not wish to share with me the secret of your grand illusion. But no matter. You are paying dearly for this device; therefore, I do not mind showing you how it is constructed. Please reach me the book."

Cardoza handed him the volume.

"YOU SEE, I AM THE EXPERT OF MANY CRAFTS, BOOK-binding being one of them. Carefully I have removed the fabric from the stiff cardboard over which the fine leather is wrapped. The two pieces of cardboard I have replaced with my special plastique explosive, which I have pressed into flat rectangles of the same dimensions. The explosive when thin becomes stiff and hard like TNT, but not so brittle. It is completely safe to handle. One can burn it, shoot it, hit it with a hammer, but it simply will not explode. It can be only detonated. So I have placed a tiny detonator attached to a miniature signal receiver in the spine of the book, where they remain undetectable. These new micro chips are wonderfully small. Not too long ago a device with the explosive power of this book would have been the size of a large shoebox. Then you see I have masterfully rebound the book with the beautiful leather, so that even you cannot distinguish it from the one you have brought me. You present this book to whomever you wish to dispatch, and then whenever you desire, you explode it."

"How?"

Altmann took a credit-card-size calculator from his pocket. "This is the detonating device. You enter the code number 32, which you have told me is your age, and extract its square root. To detonate, you press the 'equals' button. It has a range of one kilometer." He pointed to the transmitter and computer on the table. "With these the range is extended to sixty kilometers, but they are not so portable or concealable."

"Suppose it doesn't work. Do I get my money back?"

"Believe me, it will not fail. I have made many such devices, and

there have been no failures. Of course, if one does not follow my directions, or if one places it in the wrong place or detonates at the wrong time, I cannot be held accountable for the consequences. I assure you, Mr. Cardoza, not one customer has ever yet demanded back his money."

"Speaking of money," Cardoza said, reaching into the inside pocket of his jacket and handing the merchant a four by seven manilla envelope. "I believe this now belongs to you."

Altmann took the packet, looking as if he suspected one of Cardoza's magic tricks. He opened the unsealed flap and pulled a tightly compressed bundle of banknotes halfway out. "It is all here?"

"You bet. The best things come in small packages. One hundred one-hundred-dollar bills fresh from the bank, still wearing their wrapper. Care to count them?"

"It is not necessary. I know the bank and they make no mistakes. Besides no one ever cheats the Old Man. It would be folly to attempt it." He slid the money back into the envelope and placed it on the table with the testing equipment. He handed the book back to Cardoza. "Well, I believe this ends our transaction."

Cardoza put the calculator into his pocket and the book under his arm. "A pleasure doing business with you, sir."

As Altmann extended his hand for the final dismissal, the chimes sounded and he stepped to the doorway. He turned back to Cardoza. "A customer. An attractive young blonde. Well, as our business is concluded, Mr. Cardoza, I shall say good-bye. I wish you much luck in your endeavor." They shook hands, then the shopkeeper turned his attention to the pretty customer at the counter.

As Cardoza left the store with the book under his arm, he caught part of Altmann's conversation with the blonde. "*Je regrette, mademoiselle, je n'ai pas de montres à vendre. Je les repare seulement . . .*" The closing of the door cut off the remainder of the conversation.

Cardoza crossed the narrow street, walking about fifty feet to where his rented VW stood. He sat down behind the wheel, placing the book on the seat beside him.

ALTMANN, HAVING CONVINCED THE YOUNG LADY THAT he had no watches to sell, he only repaired them, placed a "closed" sign in three languages in the window. He caught a glimpse of Cardoza in the VW as he did so. *So the young American is carefully examining his purchase before he drives off. He will find nothing wrong with it.* He returned to the backroom, intending to place the ten thousand

dollars in his safe. When he opened the envelope, he found only plain typing paper cut to the size of the currency. He stood perfectly still for more than a minute, then dropped the worthless paper into the trash receptacle next to his worktable.

So the prestidigitator thinks he has obtained a free bomb by performing his sleight-of-hand. He is very foolish if he thinks I shall allow him to use it. Altmann sat down at his computer, punching in the required code. *Auf Wiedersehen, Herr Taschenspieler!* He pressed the detonating button.

MARK CARDOZA SAT IN HIS CAR ALMOST TREMBLING with anticipation, with the realization this was the culmination of months of planning to avenge the death of Valerie LaFleur, the beautiful assistant whom he levitated and floated out over the audience during his Paris magic show. The device Altmann had constructed would be a fitting instrument of retribution for the person responsible for Valerie's death in a bomb blast in Paris. Terrorists, attempting to assassinate an important political figure, had planted their first bomb in the wrong building. A week later, while attempting to rectify their previous error, they managed to kill themselves with their second bomb, which they had built themselves. One of the men had survived long enough to tell the authorities about both explosions. The first bomb, which had worked perfectly, had been built by a professional, who the authorities were certain was the Old Man, an explosives expert who conducted business throughout Europe. Because of lack of concrete evidence and the complications of crossing national borders, the police could not touch him. Cardoza, not feeling bound by the legal restrictions placed upon the law-enforcement authorities, spent two months and several thousand dollars in his quest for a referral to the Old Man.

Cardoza saw the blonde come out of the shop and walk away in the opposite direction. She was Monique LaFleur, Valerie's sister. Mark had signaled her with a concealed paging device, so her entering the shop would distract Altmann for the few seconds Cardoza needed to make two exchanges. He was certain it would take Altmann only a few minutes to discover the money envelope had been switched. If the shopkeeper reacted in the manner Cardoza was positive he would, then the Old Man would never discover the second switch—the placement of the explosive book behind the electronic equipment on the worktable. The book the magician had walked out with was a duplicate copy of the same classic work—Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. ●

*Molly would never have guessed the stranger's occupation.
But one thing was certain: she didn't want his business!*

You Meet All Kinds

by MARK J. KAMENSKY

THE BELL OVER THE DOOR TINKLED INSISTENTLY WHEN the man walked in.

Molly Welles looked up from the papers on her desk and quickly assessed him. She had a knack for sizing people up with a glance, a talent that had developed as a result of the oddballs who occasionally wandered into her printing shop: raggedy old winos, polite youngsters seeking donations for their religious sects, fast-talking hustlers hawking jewelery and watches, and other assorted characters. As Molly often embarked to her friends, you meet all kinds in this business.

But the man now carefully closing the door behind him was well-dressed, clean-cut and had a professional air about him. No problem here, Molly thought. Just a customer. Most likely business cards or resumes.

Pam DiLeo, hunched over a clacking offset machine in the back of the narrow shop, looked up, instantly arrived at the same conclusion, and went back to her work.

"Hello. I'd like to see about getting some business cards printed up," the man said genially.

"That's what we're here for," Molly replied, pointing the man at the chair at the side of her desk. The man was in his early thirties and good-looking, with an easy smile. Lawyer, Molly thought. No, he seems a little too relaxed and good-humored. A doctor just setting up his practice, she concluded.

"I know exactly what I want on the cards," he said as he sat down. His manner was pleasant but also business-like. A man who gets right to the point, Molly noticed.

Molly reached up to a shelf behind her and removed a large display

book that contained samples of various styles of business cards.

"Do you have any particular style in mind?" she asked while opening the book.

Usually she was loath to immediately toss the sample book in front of a customer. If he were unsure about what he wanted, the book's vast array of styles might only confuse him further. More than once Molly had watched someone leaf through the book for half the morning, thoughtfully considering each sample, and then select the plainest design. But she had no worries about this gentleman. He looked like the type who knows exactly what he wants.

"I don't want anything fancy," he said as he flipped the pages. "Just plain and simple." He tapped his finger on a sample card pasted on the very first page. "Here, this one will be perfect."

Molly smiled, admiring his brisk efficiency. As she turned the sample book to her to note down the style he had selected, her curiously got the better of her.

"You haven't been in the shop before, Mr . . ." Molly paused, her eyebrows raised inquisitively.

"Smith," he answered, filling in the blank. "Joe Smith."

"Molly Welles. Are you new in town?"

"Yes," he said in his pleasant voice. "Just moved here, in fact. Decided this would be a nice location to set up shop." Smith leaned toward the desk and spoke in a confidential whisper. "I think this area could use a little competition. You know, to stimulate the market."

IN HER TWENTY YEARS IN THE BUSINESS, MOLLY HAD witnessed many dreamers come in boasting airy plans of financial success, only to see them fall flat on their faces. But Smith did not seem to be that sort. He had an impressive earnestness about him. She had a hunch that he was the kind of man who could enter a field of business by storm and really shake up the competition.

"I've been trying to guess what you do. You look like a doctor."

He chuckled softly. "No, I'm not a doctor."

"Lawyer?"

"No."

Molly hesitated, not wanting to press him. It was odd, though. Usually her customers were voluble about their professions.

After an awkward moment, Smith smiled and said, "I'm an exterminator."

Molly's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Never would have guessed that."

The man reached into his pocket and extracted a folded piece of

paper. He opened it, smoothed it out on the desk, and said, "This is what I want on the cards. Exactly as it's written here."

Molly looked at the paper, and the smile melted from her face.

The paper read:

JOSEPH SMITH
PROFESSIONAL ASSASSIN
LOWEST PRICES IN TOWN
"Try My Midweek Special"

"Oh, funny," she said sourly, "very funny. Is this some sort of joke? Did my husband put you up to this?"

A perplexed look crossed Smith's countenance. "Your husband? Why, no. That's what I want on the business cards."

He paused, apparently mystified by Molly question. Then his face brightened, as if he had suddenly realized the reason for the misunderstanding.

"As I told you, I'm an exterminator," he said, as if that settled everything.

Pam DiLeo shut off the offset machine and walked toward the front of the shop.

"Moll, what's the matter?" she asked.

Molly handed Pam the paper without turning her puzzled face from Smith.

Pam scanned the words, then looked at the man, her expression equally puzzled. As if on some silent signal, the two women turned to look at each other. They tacitly reached a conclusion the moment their eyes met: the guy was a nut. The best thing was to shoo him out of the shop right away.

"No, I'm sorry," Pam said hurriedly. "We can't do this. We can't print this." She pushed the paper towards Smith as if it were diseased.

"But . . . I just want some business cards. Certainly you can order these for me." He seemed genuinely confused by the women's behavior.

Molly turned her head away and pretended to concern herself with some papers on her desk. "I'm sorry," she said waving her hand dismissively. We're busy. We can't do it. You'll have to go to another printing shop."

Slowly, reluctantly, Smith rose to his feet and moved toward the door. "I don't understand," he muttered as he opened the door. "I only want some business cards."

He shrugged and walked out.

AS SOON AS THE DOOR CLOSED, BOTH MOLLY AND PAM looked out through the front window. Smith walked to the curb and stopped, his back to the shop. A few seconds later, a large man in a black overcoat sauntered down the sidewalk and stood directly behind Smith. Suddenly, a big black sedan pulled to the curb, screeching to a halt right in front of Smith. The sedan's rear door flew open. With one deft motion, the man in the overcoat placed his hand on the back of Smith's neck, pushed his head down and shoved Smith into the back seat with his knee. A gloved hand reached from inside the car and yanked the back door shut. With a squeal of tires, the sedan sped away.

The man in the black overcoat watched the departing car for a moment, then turned and walked toward the shop. Molly and Pam, who had watched the entire incident wordlessly, remained where they were, more confused than scared. The man entered the shop and stood in front of Molly's desk.

"That guy who was just in here," he said, pointing his thumb over his shoulder, "what did he want?"

Sensing this was no time to be cagey, Molly said simply, "He wanted to order business cards."

"But we told him we couldn't do it," Pam blurted out. "We said he'd have to go somewhere else." She smiled timidly, hoping this would placate their visitor.

The man nodded his approval. "Good. I mean it's good you didn't order the cards, cause Mr. Smith has . . ."—he groped for the words—" . . . he's going to be out of the business for the immediately foreseeable future."

Smiling proudly at his fancy locution, the man reached into his pocket and removed a large wad of money. He peeled off the top bill and tossed it on the desk. Ben Franklin's face looked up at Molly. He seemed to be as confused about all of this as she was.

"That's for your trouble," the man said, gesturing toward the bill. He turned to go. The two women stared at his back, dumbfounded.

The man had the door half open when he abruptly stopped, closed the door and started to turn. As he wheeled to face them, the two women saw that his right hand was reaching under his overcoat. An odd smile creased his face. Molly and Pam gasped in unison.

Curtains, Molly thought. This is what they mean in those old movies when someone says, "It's curtains."

The man's hand came out from under the overcoat holding a small white card. Snapping it smartly between his fingers, he placed the card on the desk, next to the hundred dollar bill.

"If you ever need any exterminating done, call on us," he said. Then

he turned and walked out.

Both women looked at the card.

It read:

**SKILL-KILL
HITMEN AND RUB-OUT ARTISTS
“We Bump ‘em Off for Less”
OUR PRICES *WILL NOT BE UNDERCUT!***

Mike's Mail

HALLIDAY RESPONDS

While I was reading "Mike's Mail" in the February issue, Chris Tilghman's letter caught my eye. I appreciate his concern about the direction Mike's stories have been taking. In the years Mike has been working the streets of Miami, he's made a lot of friends. While his friends expect certain things from him, they must realize that the world out there has changed. A detective in 1984 can't walk down the same mean streets Chandler described. But don't lose faith, Chris. Between you and me, most of the stories coming up in the next few months will involve our favorite redhead in the type cases traditionalists prefer. Sure, he has had to fight Ho Lu or thwart a Russian attempt to steal a secret weapon from time to time, but he tells me that he'll always have a soft spot in his heart for the average joe or weeping blonde in distress. In fact, one night as we killed a bottle of Martell at the Beef House, he admitted that he was worried about what has happened to basic values. "Why is it," he posed, "that so many innocents must suffer?" Future stories will deal with Mike's attempt to answer the question.

Chris, thanks for caring about our friend. I always want to know what readers think about Mike's stories. So, Chris, and the rest of you, keep writing—let me know how you feel.

Brett Halliday

Dreams are what is between us and the Great Beyond and are not made to be took lightly—especially when the odds are 70 to 1 on a horse that's not supposed to win!

The Dreamer

by ARTHUR MOORE

HORSEPLAYERS, AS EVERYONE KNOWS, IS SUPERSTITIOUS sorts who believe in sorcery, voodoo, hunches and omens and would never walk under a ladder no matter how many black cats were holding it up.

Left Foot Hamish is a little squirt who has never picked a winner and mostly does not possess the moo to bet. He is thinner than a politician's spine and shortsighted as a jar of pickles. He is wearing a suit which he found in the trash barrel behind the Midnight Mission and his Salvation Army shoes squeak. He comes sliding into Katzie's saloon while I am fiddling with the form trying to juggle certain figures so that a longshot looks likely, since I have got a Jackson in my jeans.

When he sees me his weak little eyes light up like the turn signals on a tricycle and he rushes to my table with a pitch as follows: "Dubois, I have got an inside tip!"

I tell him I already know smoking is bad and I give it up.
"I mean a tip on the ponies!"

I look at him in astonishment. He has never won nothing in his life and would have lost if he bet on Lindbergh.

"Listen!" he says. "This is a sure thing." He tugs at my elbow. "Gimme the loan of a ten-spot, Dubois, please?"

"What's the horse?"

He glances around and lowers his voice. "Trey of Spades." He says it like it is the combination to the safe. "Don't breathe a word the odds shouldn't go down."

It is pitiful and I shake my head at him. "Trey of Spades ain't got a chance. His own mother wouldn't lay a nickel on his nose. I doubt if he can make it around the track."

Left Foot gets red in the face. "He is gonna win! It is fate!"

I am further surprised that he knows what fate is. I ask, "What's this tip anyways?"

He smiles like a councilman asking for a vote. I see right off that something very powerful has wormed its way into his wigwam. He says, "Just one lousy sawbuck, Dubois. One crummy ten buck bill."

"Crummy! It is ten more'n you got. Besides, Trey of Spades is 70 to 1."

"But—but-but!"

"That horse wouldn't even make good glue! I am not seeing my way clear to financin' this risky sure thing."

"But it ain't a risk!"

I say, "I will give you the dough to start a fire with, but I will give you nothing to bet on this nag. They are going to have to dope him to get him to the starting gate."

Left Foot sags like he has just been told his X-rays show no bones at all. "But this is a gold-plated tip . . ."

"I am sorry, but I am putting my gelt on Sandman in the fifth."

"Sandman is a good nag but this tip—"

"What tip?"

He smiles again and the light comes back in his eyes. "Longshots come in, Dubois. You know that."

I nod. This is true. Not for me, but they come in, maybe once a decade. Or even longer, maybe ten years.

He leans in and whispers, "This is the best kind of tip. It is fate and destiny all rolled up together. Last night I had a dream."

"A dream?"

"I dreamed of a card, the trey of spades!" He moves even closer like we are planning a payroll heist. "And when I dream it I don't know which horses is running today! This is a true sign from the Great Tote Board in the sky!"

Naturally I am much impressed with his confidence in the midnight mirage, but only boneheads back them bets. "No dice," I say. "I am laying the lettuce on Sandman." I shake the form at him. "It is a scientific fact that according to the figures he will win."

Left Foot sighs deeply and sags to the knees. "Thanks anyway, Dubois." He says it in the same kind of voice they used to bury Valentino. He gets up, shuffles out to the street and picks up a butt. It crumbles in his fingers. Left Foot is a loser. He would have lost if he bet on Tarzan.

JONESY THE BARTENDER COMES OVER TO MY TABLE. HE IS a dish-faced citizen with little twitchy moustache and ears like an eagle. He has overheard the conversation of course and is firmly on Left Foot's side. Because he had a dream once. But when he woke up the cat would not come near him for a week. He believes in every sort of hunch and hex and I have personally seen him sacrifice a chicken to ward off an eclipse of the moon. He says like, "Longshots win, Dubois, little doubter."

I am forced to admit that is a fact. "But 70 to 1 is not a totally sure risk."

"Trey of Spades is long overdue."

"So is the Andria Doria."

He grunts. "Dubois, you got no soul."

"Listen," I say, "Trey of Spades is a nag which will start in the fifth and come home in the ninth. There is no scientific reason for him being in the race at all."

"All you know about science," Jonesy yells, "is that when you flip the switch the lights come on."

I do not answer this unkind cut. But I have wondered about the light in the ice box. Left Foot is such a loser the light in his reefer probably goes out when the door is opened. Jonesy rolls his eyes and goes back behind the bar to cheat on the crossword.

And that is when I begin to reflect. Left Foot has been beating his bean against the bangtails for beaucoup years and never picked a winner yet. Never come close. *He* is the one who is due.

And this time he has dreamed a tip. That is not superstition; it is real. It is a real dream.

I STUDY THE FORM AGAIN, BUT I AM SEEING A HUGE AND big trey of spades. It is an omen and a sign and part of a portent. The important part, like the heart. I reflect even more, remembering that I once dreamed of my room number in Mrs. Sherpy's Boardinghouse. I

did not bet it and it won the next day. I also recall that Albert, the best horseplayer of us all, once claimed that he dreamed of a head of lettuce and bet on a horse named Salad Day, and it won.

Dreams are what is between us and the Great Beyond and are not made to be took lightly. Dreams are all that a little loser like Left Foot is allowed, which is maybe why the Almighty let the reverie drift into his headbone.

I glance at the clock. I have got ten minutes to get a bet down for the fifth. I run and dash outside and down the street to Sammy's Cigar Store. I am not about to buck the Almighty if He has got His mind set on seeing a dumb bangtail like Trey of Spades louse up the multitudes with a win. This is better than turning wine to water. Am I going to outsmart myself and go scientific?

Sammy is sitting behind the counter like usual, listening to Guy Lombardo records and thinking up insults to yell at his in-laws. He looks at me and says, "H'lo, Dubois. What you want?"

I pull out my one and only Jackson and spread it on the counter like peanut butter. Science is OK when you are going on a long trip, like to the moon, but this is serious. "Twenny clams on Trey of Spades to win."

Sammy round-eyes me like I have suddenly turned to green glass. "Trey of Spades! He's got harness marks on him from the plow!"

"You taking the bet or not?" What does he know?

He shrugs, scribbles the marker and I dodge out, clutching same to my bosom. I hustle back to Katzie's to listen to the radio results. When Left Foot's dream horse comes in I will buy him some sukiyaki and banana pie to eat at midnight so he will dream again.

Him and Jonesy are sitting on bar stools in front of the radio and in a minute the announcer says: "The results of the fifth race . . . the winner is Sandman. "The place horse is—"

"We won!" Left Foot screams and falls off the stool. "We won, we won!" Jonesy is likewise dancing about waving his fat arms around his fat head.

I grab Left Foot and shake him so his eyes don't focus. "You dreamed of Trey of Spades!" I accuse him. "How come you bet on Sandman?"

He untangles himself and backs away. "You—you talked me out of him!"

"Yeh," Jonesy says. "Dreams ain't scientific."

I droop and sag onto a stool. They aren't, either.



The murderer had built his entire life around an unusual philosophy. No telling what he would do next!

Always Prepared

by SUSAN SAFRANSKI

THE TWO RETIRED PSYCHIATRISTS SAT OPPOSITE EACH other, each comfortably enveloped in an overstuffed wingback chair. An exquisitely-carved ivory chess set separated the two. Between moves, they reminisced about their respective occupation.

"Also, it turns out, she had three other personalities besides the two I had previously discovered!" Taking a sip from his brandy, the gray-haired man savored the taste of the golden liquid as it rolled over his tongue and flowed smoothly down his throat.

Satisfied with both the drink and the tale, Ben said to his friend, "Well, Martin, let's hear if you can top that one!"

As Martin studied his crony, his blue eyes twinkled with the challenge. Taking a puff from his pipe, he slowly released the smoke

and watched as it danced and made designs in the air. Finally, he spoke. "Ben," he said slowly, "I think I have you beat."

Ben raised his eyebrows and caressed his silver moustache with interest.

IT WAS ABOUT TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO (CONTINUED Martin) around the time I was working quite steadily with the courts, that a Mr. J. Case was sent to me. He had previously admitted that he had murdered his wife, and it was my duty along with a small group of fellow colleagues to determine his state of mind at the time of the crime.

He was a rather tall man, in his mid-forties and he had a firm handshake, which he offered readily.

"Dr. Chulz," he said, almost merrily considering his predicament, "I assume you'd like to hear first hand the motive for my actions?"

Mr. Case's eagerness to describe a murder he had committed did not shock me. Since I had worked at the psychiatric hospital for several years with court-appointed clients, I had become very seasoned indeed. I motioned for Mr. Case to continue.

"Quite simply," he said, "I believed at the time, that if it wasn't she, it would have been I. Though I later found my suspicions to be unfortunately incorrect I must point out that my philosophy of life forced me to act as I did."

"What exactly is this philosophy, Mr. Case?" I asked him.

"Always be prepared!" he said. "I guess you could call it a legacy my mother passed on to me—a discipline she enforced throughout my upbringing.

"While I was growing up, my mother insisted that I always wear or carry along my rainwear. This meant cap, coat, golashes and umbrella, rain or shine. Her reasoning made sense, I acknowledged eventually."

He went on to report, "'Son,' she would say, 'when weathermen predict foul weather they're usually right. Since most people heed their warnings and take appropriate measures, no harm is usually done. But when blue skies and sunny weather is predicted, do you know what most people do? Well, they believe that too! Then they have cook-outs that become wash-outs after a sudden cloudburst. Poor Mabel Gorson. She was forced to seek shelter in her tiny farm house with fifty friends and relatives and tons of food after just such an event. I had advised her earlier to set up a canopy, but she waved aside my suggestion. I heard later that she was never able to remove all the potato salad from her carpets and her secret barbecue sauce recipe ate the finish right off her furniture! The list of horrors that can be attributed to people not

being prepared is endless.' I promised her then and there that I would do my best to always be prepared.

"It certainly wasn't easy. My lifestyle seemed rather odd to some, I suppose, and I didn't have many friends throughout school. During my adolescence I comforted myself with the knowledge that, while my peers shared greasy combs and squandered their money on ridiculous records and faddist attire, I never had to fear a suspect comb. And any money I earned toiling at my mother's restaurant was put aside for the days I would enter college. Fortunately, due to the fact that I always prepared for the event of a surprise quiz, which teachers seemed to relish, I was able to maintain top grades throughout my school days and was admitted to a prestigious college on full academic scholarship.

"Later, after my mother passed on, I became the proprietor of her restaurant. Much of my savings were then invested into remodeling, since one must keep up with current trends in business. I made careful investments in other areas, to always insure a back-up nest egg. Moreover, in a short time, my restaurant became quite successful.

"It was there that I met my wife, Melanie. She was looking for employment and she was oh so beautiful . . ."

BEN SUDDENLY CLEARED HIS THROAT AND SAID, "Pardon me, Martin, for interrupting your story. But with this Case fellow's penchant for preparedness, how in the world could he ever embark on one of life's passages for which one can never truly prepare?"

Miffed as he was by the interruption of his memories, Martin, gentleman that he was, betrayed no irritation when he replied, "Good point, Ben. One that I duly mentioned to Mr. Case, who in turn answered."

"LOVE! WHO CAN EXPLAIN ITS MYSTICAL POWER? OF course, the fact that Melanie always carried an umbrella was also a plus. We were so happy," he sighed. "But as our first anniversary drew near a change came over her. She became secretive, making phone calls in a hushed voice, running up expenses she wouldn't explain. Most upsetting was that she and my head waiter Roland began to get very cozy.

"Everytime I turned around they would be huddled together, whispering. Time and time again, whenever I joined them, their conversation would instantly cease.

"I began to spy on them when Melanie wouldn't give a reasonable explanation about their apparent conspiracy, and about which I

nervously cajoled her.

"I soon overheard phrases such as, 'It will blow him away . . . he'll never know what hit him . . . the surprise of a lifetime . . . it will get him good!'

"When I overheard them say 'Tonight's the night!' and laugh smugly, I pulled out my revolver without hesitation. I always carried a revolver in the event of personal assault or robbery. I shot them both!

"My dear Melanie, the doctors told me later, went instantly. No suffering, thank heaven. Roland recovered quite well, and he had it relayed to me that it would have been a helluva anniversary party for Melanie and me, also that he quit!

"I was in a state of shock, Doctor, shock!"

He then slapped his hands to his knees and concluded by saying, "That's all of it. My fate now rests with you, sir."

"WELL, MARTIN," BEN ASKED AS HE POURED THEM BOTH a refill. "What was your recommendation concerning Mr. Case?"

As he took the glass from his friend, Martin answered, "I knew most assuredly that Mr. Case was deeply disturbed and that prison would not be appropriate. So I recommended committal to the State Asylum. But, I also stated vehemently that it should be long term, perhaps for life, given his particular psychosis."

Tamping his pipe, Martin added, "After all, one can never be certain of what another who has built his entire life around the motto 'always be prepared' may do next. Especially one named Justin Case."

Ben raised his glass and toasted Martin's tale in gracious defeat.
But he thought silently, *I'll get him next time.* ●

MYSTERY MINIQUIZ

Who is Harry Palmer?

The cockney crook turned secret agent in the Len Deighton spy novels.

What famous sleuth was involved in the 1939 movie, *The Gracie Allen Murder Case?*

The detective was S.S. Van Dine's creation, Philo Vance.



Stiff Competition

BOOK REVIEWS by JOHN BALL

If you are ready for a wild one, then you will want to read *Metzger's Dog* by Thomas Perry. The dog in question is black, 200 pounds, and viciously mean. He was liberated against his will from a junkyard. This remarkable beast is owned and operated by Dr. Henry Metzger. Dr. Metzger, the source of whose degree is not given, is a cat belonging to a man called Chinese Gordon. Mr. Gordon is a gifted amateur extortionist who takes on the whole CIA. Clinical tests prove this can be injurious to one's health. There is much black humor, particularly when Gordon ties up the whole city of Los Angeles for a day with all the phones out and the freeways *hors de combat*. This is Perry's second novel; his *The Butcher Boy* won the Edgar for the best first novel of the year. (Scribner's, \$14.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

It has taken thirteen years for Edward Candy's academic mystery, *Words For Murder, Perhaps* to reach this country via an American edition. It's a pleasant piece about a not-too-young temporary lecturer in the Extension Division who gives a course in the mystery novel and finds himself involved in murder. He is not, however, the detective; the police professionals handle that and very competently. The groves of academe in this case are venerable and dusty, but the people who inhabit them are thoroughly believable as are the few mature students who take the course. Not a classic, but an agreeable entertainment. (Doubleday Crime Club, \$11.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

It is very good news that the wonderful Judge Dee mysteries of Robert Van Gulik are being republished in new hardcover editions. If you have missed this magistrate sleuth from seventh century China, don't do so any longer. The author, who was a distinguished Dutch diplomat, lived in China and Japan for many years and was fluent in the local languages. He also studied the life of the real Judge Dee and then recreated it in a series of now classic mystery novels. Don't make the mistake of thinking that the Judge Dee books might be stuffy; the poisoned tea episode in *The Chinese Gold Murders* may very well be the best locked room puzzle, with the most brilliant solution, in the entire literature. This book and *The Chinese Bell Murders* are now available for \$10.95 each, with the author's original illustrations. (Harper and Row)

☆ ☆ ☆

Bartholomew Gill's books about Inspector Peter McGarr have been praised for their rich, completely Irish background. The latest in this series, *McGarr and the P.M. of Belgrave Square*, deals with a murdered antique dealer and the complicated doings of his life. American readers not familiar with Irish idiom may have some trouble in understanding all that goes on since much of the dialog uses expressions not generally known here. Reading this book was a little like seeing *The Playboy of the Western World* in Dublin: both were, in a different way, enjoyable. (Viking, \$13.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

The latest of the Hitchcock anthologies is called *A Choice of Evils*. It was edited by Elana Lore, who presumably selected the 34 short stories that fill its pages. The author list is distinguished, with contributions

from some of the very best in the field today. For bedside reading, and a little relaxation after a hard day, this is a very good choice. (The Dial Press, \$12.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

John Penn offers *Stag Dinner Death*, a rather thin little mystery concerning a gentlemen's club in London. When murder intervenes at a dinner party, a Harley Street physician, who is one of the guests, investigates. Regretfully, we suggest that this one be passed by. (Scribner's, \$11.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Michael L. Cook is well established as the definitive historian and cataloger of mystery/suspense magazines and newspapers. He has done for the shorter form of the mystery story what Allen J. Hubin did for books with his monumental *Crime Fiction (1749-1980): A Comprehensive Bibliography*. Mr. Cook's *Monthly Murders* and *Murder by Mail* are already standard reference works. Now he has added another, *Mystery, Detective, and Espionage Magazines*, almost 800 pages of detailed information on every magazine in the genre you ever heard of plus a good many more. He supplies a history of each publication together with authoritative commentary on editorial policies, the contents, and almost everything else anyone might wish to know about hundreds of magazines. Detailed contents data are given in *Monthly Murders* for the fiction magazines; this new work covers a much wider span and is a perfect supplement to the earlier work. Reference librarians and serious collectors will find this to be a gold mine of information. Now that it is here, it is invaluable. (Greenwood Press, Box 5007, Westport, CT 06881, \$65.00)

☆ ☆ ☆

In recent years so much fiction has been written about World War II, the subject, for all of its magnitude, is becoming saturated. The newest entry is *The Emerald Illusion* by Ronald Bass. Once more we have a British double agent pitted against a brilliant German SS officer. It is, however, very well done and the final resolution will keep most readers turning the pages. The technique of interrogation is shown with intense realism. The expertise displayed by Mr. Bass here is both notable and accurate. If you don't mind having the Waffen SS brought back to life once more, then you will find this a gripping story. (Morrow, \$14.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

A new book by Michael Gilbert is always an event. In his latest, *The Black Seraphim*, he turns from his high proficiency in police procedures and espionage to write about murder in a British cathedral close. This is a very English book, so much so that the titles and duties of many of the people concerned will be relatively meaningless to American readers. The author, however, is so deft and skillful his story still comes through as a superior whodunit amidst all the formality and observances of *Evensong*. (Harper and Row, \$13.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

PAPERBACK NOTES: If the complexities of the human mind under stress are your dish, you will particularly welcome the *John Franklin Bardin Omnibus*, which contains three of this remarkable author's best books. From Penguin in quality soft cover at \$7.95 . . . D.W. Arathorn's intensive study of a young terrorist, *Kamal*, is now in paperback from Avon at \$3.95 . . . If you haven't yet read Elmore Leonard, try his *52 Pick-up* or *Unknown Man #89* and you'll see why his work has been getting so much praise. Both from Avon at \$2.95 each . . . The Walker British Mystery series has added four more titles: *Ransom Town* by Peter Alding, *Undertow* by Desmond Cory, *Too Many Enemies* by William Haggard and John Sladek's *Black Aura*. Each book is \$2.95. Collectors will be after these soon . . . An espionage entry this month is *End of the River* by B.L. Van Vors. The central American jungles are the scene. A fairly formula plot, including a romance, but a good read for shootemup fans. Avon, \$3.50 . . . Diana Henstell debuts with a novel of occult terror, *The Other Side*. Largely a woman's book, it still has plenty of chills for male readers too. Bantam, \$3.50 . . . Pinnacle offers Betsy Aswad's *Winds of the Old Days*, which is built around a series of Super Bowl Sundays. With murder attached, of course. \$3.50 . . . Argentina is the setting for Robert Houston's new violent adventure novel, *Blood Tango*. The title tells it all. An Avon original at \$3.50

MYSTERY MINIQUIZ

Claire Trevor won a Best Supporting Actress oscar as Edward G. Robinson's girlfriend in what Humphrey Bogart movie?

The 1948 film, which also featured Lauren Bacall, was *Key Largo*.

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